



# JEFF STRAND

# CYCLOPS

# ROAD

"A masterful storyteller. His writing is always fresh, compelling, funny, frightening, and inventive."

—*NY Times* bestselling author  
Jonathan Maberry

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By Jeff Strand

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www.JeffStrand.com](http://www.JeffStrand.com)

## PROLOGUE

We're halfway up the first hill when I suddenly decide that roller coasters are better suited for guys twenty years younger. Of course Becky, fearless, is laughing and has her arms in the air.

I make a joke about how amusement park ride inspection standards have declined over the years, and Becky makes a joke about having seen somebody walk away with a piece of track that she hopes wasn't important. I explain that, due to rising material costs, roller coaster designers have started using a less durable type of steel, which isn't dangerous as long as we don't move around too much, and Becky explains that there are a lot of sinkholes in the area, which is unlikely to be problematic but which should be noted just for the sake of being an informed rider.

I mention, casually, that if you smack into a bird while you're hurtling down the first hill, the impact can be so great that the bird's beak will go all the way through your skull and pop out the other side. Becky acknowledges the truth of this statement. In fact, she explains, there was a recent incident where an *entire pelican* went through somebody's skull while they were going down the hill of a roller coaster—not this one, don't be alarmed—and the bird flew away as if nothing happened. The rider, sadly, did not survive. It was a pretty memorable way to go, though.

This isn't a very popular theme park, and the other riders are four rows back, so nobody else can hear what we're saying. This is important to us. My wife and I bonded over a shared dislike of inconsiderate people.

And now we're almost over the hill, and, wow, two hundred feet is higher up than I remember. Immediately after we get off the ride, I'll probably hurry into the men's room to discreetly dry heave, but for now, I'm laughing and having a crazy amount of fun.

We're seeing *Rent* for the third time. The first time I saw it, I was forced to gaze deep into my soul and admit that, yes, I like Broadway musicals. Sure, I can't help but think that it wouldn't kill some of these characters to get jobs, but the music is unbelievably good and will be happily stuck in my brain for days afterward.

I didn't share this secret with Becky for a while. If I confessed that I enjoyed musicals, I'd risk losing the relationship credits I received for being dragged to them. Tragically, she caught me bobbing my head during *Cabaret*, and I was busted.

Still can't get into ballet, though.

Becky is coughing a lot, but she's careful to do it only during the loud parts. Fortunately, *Rent* is a high-energy show, so she doesn't have to hold in the coughs for very long. It's a good thing she doesn't enjoy somber, quiet theater.

Did I mention we got the tickets for free? Radio contest. Seeing a show for the third time, even a beloved one, seemed too frivolous, but *somebody's* knowledge of '90s grunge music came in rather handy. Third row center. Suck it, everybody whose knowledge of '90s grunge music and ability to be the ninth caller to a radio station is inferior to my own!

\*

I am a cheese melting genius.

Becky is an outstanding cook. Even if she were a sullen, unpleasant smelling, penis-severing madwoman, I probably still would have asked her to marry me after the first night she made spaghetti. I often have impure thoughts about her chicken Parmesan.

I do all of the cooking now, which means a lot of Hamburger Helper and pre-packaged salads, but tonight she was actually hungry, so for a special treat I decided to go with fondue. I'm not saying that I made the fondue from scratch. I *am* saying that I added garlic and other seasonings to the cheese, and it is mind-bogglingly delicious.

Becky dips another piece of bread into the cheese and pops it into her mouth. "This is sooooo good."

I jab a slice of granny smith apple on my fondue fork and dunk it, swirling the apple to ensure full cheese coverage. "We should have this every night."

Becky grins. "I'd be eight hundred pounds."

"I wouldn't mind." She's a long way from being overweight these days. "I'd give you sponge baths every morning. We could knock out that wall so you could leave the house when you wanted."

"We'd have to rent a crane to move me."

"Well, how much is a crane these days? It can't be that much."

"I think it is, actually."

"Okay, so if we only had fondue six times a week, you'd be, what, seven hundred pounds? I'm sure you could walk by yourself then."

Becky nods and stabs another piece of bread. "Deal. Damn, this is good."

Heh heh. She doesn't even know that I've got chocolate and strawberries for dessert.

\*

We couldn't have asked for better weather. If I had completed a weather request checklist and emailed it to God, we wouldn't have gotten anything more perfect. Getting caught in a rainstorm is all romantic and stuff, but I much prefer sunshine, clear skies, and seventy-two degrees.

Perfect weather on a day that Becky is feeling up to leaving the house. Hell yeah!

"I'm even having a good hair day," Becky jokes, patting her bare scalp.

The park ranger was right: the trail is completely wheelchair accessible. We're not even inconveniencing the other people. It's so smooth that Becky could sleep on the way back to the car, and she probably will.

And yes, we are capable of appreciating nature without a constant stream of chatter. I just push her along, quietly enjoying the trail and Becky's happiness.

\*

I'm not going to lie. When we play Crazy Eights, it brings out a level of competitive ferocity in Becky that would cause your average coach in the Super Bowl to run yipping back to his mommy.

It doesn't even matter that I have to hold the cards for both of us. She can tap the card that she wants to play, no problem, and though her trash talking is just a whisper, I can see in her eyes that the outcome of this game is more important than any nuclear weapons treaty negotiation.

I was tempted to let her win, since this could be our last game, but no. If she thought for one second that I wasn't playing at the height of my Crazy Eights abilities, I'd be floating down that tunnel toward a white light ahead of her.

I play a six of clubs.

Becky only mouths the word "shit," out of respect for Ellen in the next bed, who does not appreciate cursing.

I show her the top card from the draw pile. She mouths "shit" three more times before she can play a six of hearts.

I don't have any sixes or any hearts. I practically have to draw the entire frickin' deck to get one. I know that my devastating loss is imminent.

\*

As I flip through the channels, I see that our favorite movie is on. There's only twenty minutes left and it's edited for television, but still, it's *A Fish Called Wanda*, and I hold her hand while we laugh our butts off. Technically, Becky just smiles, but I laugh enough to successfully detach each butt.

Becky asks me to turn off the TV when it's over, because this way it can be the last movie she ever saw.

It doesn't quite work out that way. She actually dies two days later while Ellen is watching *Miss Congeniality 2*. But I choose to remember the fun we had watching *A Fish Called Wanda*, and these are my memories, so I can pick whichever ones I want.

## CHAPTER ONE

I'm sitting at my desk, trying to decide if I'm going to tell my boss to go to hell.

I probably won't. I guess he's not the most horrible guy in the world. Company policy said that my three days of bereavement could be extended to five days with manager approval, and he gave the approval. Actually, everybody was nice when I came back a week ago. Flowers, hugs, and sincere sounding recitations of "I'm sorry."

But I've despised Dirk for years, and my job for even longer. Part of me says, *hey, your wife just died—maybe now isn't the best time to be removing other elements of stability from your life.* Another part says, *you've been putting up with that smirking weasel for way too long. If you're suddenly motivated to get out of this place, even if it's only because you're emotionally fragile, then go for it.*

I'm not sure which part is right. The idea of quitting my job, selling my house, and leaving Florida has a lot of appeal. I don't necessarily want to move up to a land of glaciers, but I'm over this swampy bug-filled southern heat. Somewhere halfway up the country would be nice. Get a fresh start. Becky and I were together for nineteen years (well, we would have been, if she'd made it another month) and lived in Tampa the whole time, but there aren't any ties here that I can't sever.

I shouldn't be impulsive. I should start selling my stuff. Put my home on the market. Find a new job in a new city. *Then* tell Dirk to go to hell.

The logical part of my brain makes a good point. I've got a little bit of money, but not nearly enough to just uproot myself at the age of forty-four and go off in search of an unknown future. I did have several months where I could've worked out the details of this future, but my post-Becky existence wasn't something I wanted to deal with before now.

I'll wait to quit my job.

And when I do quit, it will be in a polite manner, with no grievances aired and the appropriate two weeks' notice.

Suddenly Dirk is at my cubicle. "Evan. My office." He leaves without waiting for acknowledgment.



As my boss, he is well within his rights to have the attitude that I should drop everything to meet with him. But I've got a phone to my ear. He doesn't *know* that I'm on hold. What if I was listening to a customer?

I hang up and walk into his office, where he's already sitting behind his desk. He motions for me to sit down. After I'm uncomfortably seated, he looks at me with his rat-face and smiles.

Some people were born with a rat-face. It's not their fault. They're perfectly nice people, yet nature gave them a face that looks mean and untrustworthy. Dirk, on the other hand, has a perfectly normal, even handsome face that he contorts into something rat-like. I'm sure he doesn't do it on purpose. When he's being condescending, which is often, his awful face makes it even worse.

Dirk is ten years younger than me. Having a younger boss doesn't bother me at all, but Dirk *thinks* it does, so he brings it up as often as possible. He's a master of the art of being a prick without ever crossing the line into a Human Resources violation.

"How're you holding up?" he asks, in such a way that I know he didn't call me in here to find out how I'm coping with my wife's death.

"Fine. Just trying to keep busy."

He nods. "Busy is good. Got to keep your mind occupied."

"Yeah."

"So. The spreadsheet you sent this morning."

"Yes?"

He swivels his computer monitor around. "See this?" He taps the monitor with his index finger. "I can zoom in if it's too small."

"I can see it."

"Then you see the problem, right?"

"Ah, okay. Sorry about that."

"Tell me what you think the problem is. Just want to make sure we're on the same page."

"Extra zero. Sorry."

He swivels the monitor back to its original position. "I know it's only a tiny little zero, but it does mean the difference between forty-nine thousand dollars and four hundred and ninety thousand dollars. That's a discrepancy of four hundred and forty-one thousand dollars."

I know for a fact that Dirk can't subtract those numbers in his head. He did the math before I got here.

"I understand," I tell him. "Again, I'm sorry."

"I get that you're distracted. That's completely reasonable. I just don't think I'd be a very effective manager if I let this slide, right?"

I wonder if my desire to grab him by the hair and bash his face against his desk until he has no teeth left is an overreaction.

I think, considering the circumstances, that one typo in three

hundred lines is actually pretty good. I don't want to lose my temper. Don't want to do anything I'll regret. His job is to ensure a high standard of quality amongst his employees. I did indeed add an extra zero that should not have been there.

Of course, this is an internal report. Nobody is ever going to see it but Dirk. I can't help but believe that a man who wasn't pure evil would have just corrected the error and not called a new widower into his office.

Am I trying to use Becky's death to excuse my mistakes? I don't want to be that guy. I want to take responsibility for my own actions. But, thinking about this calmly and rationally, it is my calm and rational opinion that he is being an unbelievable dickhead.

That's fine. I'll quit later. I'm not going to let him push me over the edge.

"Anyway, no big deal," Dirk says. "Just send me a revised one when you get back to your desk."

Okay, I'm over the edge now.

"No disrespect," I say, "but you could delete the extra zero yourself right now, couldn't you? I mean, the cursor is right there."

"I could, but I'm not the one who put it in there, now am I, Evan?"

I don't feel the true white-hot rage until he gets to "now am I, Evan?" He's spoken to me like this many times before, and I shouldn't expect him to treat me any differently now, but at the moment, I'm *really* not in the mood for this.

I sit on my hands to ensure that I don't punch him.

"You condescending little creep," I say, leaning forward.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not going to be treated this way by a wretched, wormy, arrogant jerk." Neither "wretched" nor "wormy" were my original word choices, but I made a last-instant decision to avoid profanity.

"I don't much care for your tone," Dirk informs me.

"I don't much care for your—" I start to say "rat-face," but, no, I should take the higher road and focus on his personality, not his physical appearance. "—tone, either."

Wow. That was weak.

"Clearly you returned to the office too soon. I'm going to ignore the quality of your work *and* this outburst, but I'll need you to behave like a professional."

"Screw you."

"What?"

"Seriously, Dirk, screw you. I'm done taking crap from a pathetic, snotty, unintelligent, demeaning, reprehensible..." I trail off. I'm really terrible at this kind of conversation.

"Do I need to call security?"

"Only if you can't handle somebody telling you what a cretin you are. An idiotic cretin." Idiotic cretin? Who the hell says that? What's the matter with me?

"You realize that you're fired, right?"

"Indeed I do."

"Then please leave my office and box up your personal belongings. I'll arrange for a security guard to escort you out of the building."

"Fine, you..." My mind goes blank. I can't think of a single devastating thing to call him. I'm going to be fired without getting to unleash a decent tirade. My frustration level is off the charts. If I'm going to burn this bridge, I want to obliterate him with my words, not have him remember me for my inept babbling.

Nope. I've got nothing. This is the worst job-quit ever.

I desperately want to punch him.

Not desperately enough to face assault charges, though. That would add an extra level of pure suck to this experience that I'm not ready to handle.

I want to give him a steel-eyed gaze, but he's looking at the phone that he has now picked up, so I stand up and walk out of his office, pretending that I've retained my dignity. I try to slam the door behind me, but it's one of those doors that has a damper to control the speed at which it closes, so it basically just swings most of the way shut and denies me the satisfaction of a loud bang. It also kind of hurts my arm.

As I stride toward my cubicle, a lengthy anti-Dirk rant appears in my head, fully formed. Of course.

I walk past my cubicle and keep going. I don't care about my personal possessions. There's nothing in this hellhole that I want.

By the time the elevator has reached the ground floor, I can think of at least nine things I want, including a framed picture of Becky. I'll have to come back and get it later. I'm sure *that* won't be awkward.

At least I didn't start sobbing.

I walk out of the building. Okay, well, I'm free of my employment now. Aside from the horrified thoughts of "*What the hell have I done?*" that are exploding through my mind, and being positively sick to my stomach, and the urge to curl up into the fetal position and twitch, I'm feeling pretty good.

I double over and throw up onto the grass.

I should've thrown up on Dirk's car. Nobody could prove that I did it on purpose.

I'm sure I can manage another round of spewing, but his car is in the opposite direction from mine and it's not worth it. I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand and walk to my own car.

*What the hell have I done? What the hell have I done? What the hell have I done?*

He'll take me back, right? He has to. You can't fire somebody for misconduct while they're mourning the death of a spouse. Company policy would never allow that. And when I replay the whole conversation in my mind, as painful as that is, I don't think Dirk actually *told* me that I was fired. It was very strongly implied, but "You know you're fired, right?" isn't the same thing as "You're fired." I may be okay.

No. I'm not going back. I should have done this a long time ago. Perhaps after one of the eight hundred times that Becky told me I should look for a new job.

I get into my car and promptly vomit all over my steering wheel. And then I cry.

\*

Obviously, I want to clean up the mess as soon as possible, but it's very important to me that Dirk or any of my former co-workers *not* find me in the parking lot with tears streaming down my face and puke on the steering wheel. So I drive away from the building, hoping that this is my low point in life, although I suppose a police officer could pull me over for some sort of traffic violation and knock me a couple of notches lower.

I successfully make it the four blocks to the nearest restaurant without seeing red and blue flashing lights in my rear-view mirror. After I've cleaned up my car and enjoyed a meal of nutrient-rich greasy fried chicken, I feel slightly better. Yes, I wish that the encounter had ended with Dirk weeping from my blistering wit, followed by a roundhouse kick to the throat, but still, this is much better than being at that job ten years from now.

I'm not sure what to do with the rest of my day. I don't feel like going home.

I think I'll just walk somewhere. Nowhere.

So I pop a pair of headphones into my cell phone, set my eclectic music library on random play, and walk. I crank the music up loud in an effort to drown out my internal monologue. I'll deal with my future tomorrow.

I walk for hours. I stop once to get a bottle of water and a candy bar, and a second time about fifteen minutes after that when I see a woman being mugged.

## CHAPTER TWO

I've never been in this park before. Under normal circumstances, it's not the kind of place I'd be walking when it's starting to get dark.

The woman is pressed up against a tree. I can't tell how old she is from this far away, about two hundred feet. Her long red hair is striking. She's at gunpoint. I can't hear what the mugger is saying to her, but presumably it's something impolite.

I pause my music and touch the phone icon to call the police.

That was a mistake. The lit screen captures the mugger's attention. He swings the gun in my direction. "Drop the phone!" he shouts.

I have no idea how good of a shot he is. In theory, if I turn and run, there's more of a chance that he'll miss than that I'll take a bullet in the back. He may not shoot at all. Most likely, he won't even finish mugging the woman; he'll just flee before the cops arrive.

I drop my phone.

"Get over here!" he shouts.

Walking closer to him seems like an insanely bad idea. Does he want to murder the witness, or does he just want to steal my wallet? I could try to reason with him, convince him that he's chosen the wrong path in life and that he'd be much happier *not* mugging women in the park, but after the disaster with Dirk, I'm not confident in my verbal abilities.

I can't just run. It's not as if I could get help in time to do the woman any good. And I don't want headlines to read *Local Chickenshit Leaves Woman To Die*.

With sweat pouring down my sides, I walk forward.

The woman knocks the man to the ground. He lands on his ass.

She hit him with something, but she did it so quickly that I'm not sure what she used.

When she cracks him over the skull with it, I see that it's a wooden pole, maybe three feet long. The mugger flops over, hopefully just unconscious.

I pick up my phone and hurry over to her. "Are you okay?" I ask.

She's beautiful. Maybe thirty years old. She has on a short black dress and is wearing a huge backpack.

"I wish you'd stayed put," she says.

"Why?"

She gestures to some trees. "Because there are three more of them."

I'm unhappy to see three additional muggers step into view, not even ten feet away. They're young, around college-aged, although I doubt they're pursuing higher education. They each take out a switchblade and snap it open, moving with such synchronicity that I'm positive it's something they practiced.

"How about you make this easy for us?" asks one of them. He's wearing a leather jacket even though it's a very warm April evening. He points his blade at the woman. "You drop your backpack on the ground." Then he points the blade at me. "And you drop your wallet."

Thank God. He only wants to rob us. I take out my wallet, hold it up to the mugger to show him that I'm not going to try any funny business, and toss it onto the ground between us.

"Your phone, too."

I toss the phone next to my wallet.

The woman hasn't moved.

"Backpack," the mugger says, waving the blade at her.

The woman shakes her head.

"You kidding me?" the mugger asks. "Are you trying to get shot?"

"You don't have a gun. You would have shown it to me by now. Your friend had the only gun; that's why he was the one to accost me. The rest of you were watching in case matters went awry. Which they have."

"Well, we've got three knives."

"I know."

"You think we won't cut you because you're a woman?"

"Not at all. The last quality I see in you is chivalry."

"Backpack. Drop it. Now."

"You should do what he says," I tell the woman, somehow believing that I'm being helpful.

"No."

The mugger shrugs. "All right. I tried to be cool about this, but you had to go and—"

His head flies back as the pole smacks into the middle of his forehead. He stumbles backwards a few steps but doesn't fall. Before the stunned expression has left his face, she's struck him three more times. Now he falls.

One of the other muggers slashes at her. She lets out a wince as his blade slices across her upper left arm.

I should do something.

She swings the pole at his legs. The mugger yelps and falls onto his back. He throws his knife at her. She moves her pole in an attempt

to deflect it, but the throw is so off-target that it sails harmlessly past her.

She whacks him three more times. It looks like it really freaking hurts.

The last mugger quickly scoops up my wallet and phone, then runs off through the trees into the darkness.

"Are you going to chase after him?" the woman asks me.

"Uh, he still has a knife."

"All right." She uses her free hand to smooth down her dress, and then gives me a polite nod. "Thank you for your attempt to help."

She walks off.

"Hey! Shouldn't we, I don't know, make sure they're not dead or something?"

She doesn't stop walking. "They're not dead. Brain damage, possibly, but they weren't making good use of their brains anyway."

I stand there for a moment. No way am I chasing after a switchblade-wielding criminal, even if he's got my cash and credit card and phone. But I can't just let the woman leave.

I hurry after her. "Where are you going?"

"The same place I was headed before."

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"That's your right."

"Do you have a phone?"

"No."

"Your arm is cut pretty bad."

She stops walking. A trickle of blood has run all the way down her arm. She lets out a sigh of frustration.

"You should go to the hospital," I say.

"I don't go to hospitals."

"Okay, but you should get *somebody* to patch it up. You might need stitches."

"I'll do it myself."

"Seriously?"

"Why would I joke about stitching up my own arm? Who would that amuse?" She resumes walking.

"Look, you should really let me drive you to an emergency room."

"I assure you, I'm not going to let myself bleed out. Since we've already established that the attackers are not dead, I'd like to put some distance between us before they recover."

"Maybe we should go back and get the one guy's gun."

"You're welcome to do that."

We continue walking.

"I'm not trying to be a pain," I say. "I just...I can't let you walk away from this. We have to give a statement to the cops."

"Why?"

"Because they tried to mug us! I mean, they *tried* to mug you, and *succeeded* in mugging me."

"So you want them to be jailed?"

"Well, yeah, and to get my stuff back."

"I feel that the pain they've endured is sufficient punishment for their crime. If you seek further retribution, I completely understand and I wish you the best. I also understand your desire to get your items back. Take whatever measures you deem necessary. That said, though I'll admit I don't have a strong base of knowledge about how law enforcement works, I'm relatively certain that your stolen property is gone forever."

"Who *are* you?"

"My name is Harriett. Who are you?"

"I'm Evan."

"Pleasure to meet you, Evan."

"Harriett, that's a really nasty cut, and I'm not going to let you leave without making sure your arm is okay."

"Fine. We'll walk a bit further, and then you can watch me sew up my wound. Is that sufficient?"

"I guess."

"Good."

We continue walking. I can't remember ever having been so baffled by a female.

"Are you hitchhiking?" I ask.

"No. I don't use mechanical transportation."

"You don't look Amish."

"I don't know what that means."

"Amish. They don't use modern technology. You know, they're in that movie *Witness* with Harrison Ford."

"I don't watch movies."

"Really?"

"Why do you keep assuming that I'm lying to you? Are you a pathological liar yourself?"

"No, no, it's just that not watching movies is kind of unusual, don't you think? Do you own a television set?"

"Everything I own is in my pack."

"How far are you traveling? Sorry about all the questions, but you have to understand, you were being threatened by guys with guns and knives and you took them out with a stick. I don't see that very often. It made me curious."

"That's reasonable. I'm going to Arizona."

"Arizona?"

"You've not heard of it?"



"You're walking to Arizona?"

"Yes."

"That's..." If I had my phone, I could look up the distance. "That's a few states away."

"I know."

"Maybe two thousand miles."

"I didn't say I'd be there by morning."

"I don't think there's even a route that lets you walk the whole way."

"Do you hear me criticizing your plans?"

"I'm just saying, I don't think it can be done."

"Sir, if you'd rescued me from the assailants, I suppose that I'd be in your debt and I'd gratefully listen to you telling me that I don't know what I'm doing. Since that's not how the encounter worked out, I'd rather not hear it."

"All right," I say. "That's fair."

We walk in silence for a few minutes. As we go around the bend, I see the convenience store where I stopped before walking to the park.

"I'll get you some stuff to patch up your arm," I tell her.

"I have medical supplies."

"Okay."

She hesitates. "I wasn't expecting to have to use them so soon. I guess it won't hurt to let you purchase a bandage for this particular wound."

"Cool. Oh, no, wait...my wallet's gone. I don't have any money." I dig into my pockets and find thirty-seven cents.

"I'll use my own supplies."

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"They won't come after us here," she says, as we walk into the well-lit area in front of the store. She removes her backpack, sits down, and leans against the building.

"I have to call the police and then cancel my credit card," I tell her. "Don't go anywhere."

"Will the authorities delay me?"

"They'll probably want a statement."

"Then do you really have to call them?"

"Yeah, because if the guy has used the card already, I'll need to have an official record that I reported it to the police. Otherwise I could get stuck with eight thousand dollars' worth of charges or something."

She nods and unzips her backpack.

I walk into the convenience store. The clerk is kind enough to let me borrow his phone. The time I spend talking to the police is time that the criminal could be on a fun-filled shopping spree, so I decide

to cancel the card first.

Apparently Tuesday evening is a good time to be mugged, because I'm not on hold for very long and the process is only slightly nightmarish. I'm also going to have to get a new driver's license, new insurance cards, and I've lost the eight stamps I'd accumulated toward a free submarine sandwich. Could be worse. I could be an unemployed widower. Oh, wait...

The good news is that he didn't use my card. And, at the most, I had forty dollars in my wallet. Since I must reluctantly agree with the assessment that no way in hell am I getting my stuff back, I decide to go with Harriett's wishes and not involve the authorities.

I kind of expect her to be gone when I step back outside, but she's still there. She's cleaned her arm with some antiseptic wipes, which are discarded on the cement next to her, and she's holding a threaded needle up to the cut.

I sit down beside her. "Are you really going to do that yourself?"

"Yes."

"Without something to numb the pain?"

"I took three aspirin."

"Okay."

"Do you need anesthesia before you watch me?"

"You don't have to be sarcastic. I just think it's—*Jesus Christ!*"

I can't believe she is stitching up her own cut. It's not as if I haven't seen a lot of unpleasant medical procedures over the past few months, but not somebody doing it to herself.

Harriett pulls the thread tight, and loops the needle around for a second stitch.

"Anyway," I say, "I decided not to—" I suck in a deep breath through my teeth as she sticks the needle in again. I can tell from her face that it really hurts, but she doesn't make a sound or shed a tear. "—call the police—*gaah, how the hell do you do that?*"

She finishes the third stitch, then starts to tie it off. It's in an awkward spot for her to do it herself, but she seems to be managing all right.

Harriett inspects her work and then, satisfied, puts the needle and thread back into a small first aid kit.

"So, pain isn't really a big deal for you, huh?" I ask.

"I don't see any reason to dwell on it." She puts the kit into her backpack, zips it up, and stands. "Do I need to wait for questioning?"

"Nah, we're fine. I didn't call the police."

"Thank you. I've already been delayed long enough."

"Could you do me a huge favor before you go?" I ask. "I have to know why you're walking to Arizona. I'm an obsessively curious guy. Not knowing will keep me up all night. Please."

"You won't believe me."

"That doesn't matter. I just need to know."

"No. You'll tell everyone about the mentally disturbed woman you met, and I'm not interested in being the target of your ridicule."

"I won't make fun of you. I promise."

She glances at my left hand. "Does your wife approve of you talking to strange women after dark?"

"Becky died. It hasn't even been two weeks."

Harriett puts her hand over her mouth. "Oh. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be disrespectful."

"It's fine. I mean, it's not *fine*, but what you said was fine."

She looks deep into my eyes, as if trying to discern whether or not I am a lying sack of shit.

"All right," she says. She takes a deep breath. "I am on my way to slay a Cyclops."

## CHAPTER THREE

I want to say, "Okay, well, thank you for your time," and let her resume her journey. But she looks so sincere that I feel like I should play along for, I don't know, fifteen seconds or so before we go our separate ways.

"A Cyclops, huh?"

"Yes."

I'm suddenly out of questions. She was intriguing when she beat the crap out of some muggers and stitched up her own arm, but as desperately as I need some distractions in my life right now, I don't have time for a crazy lady.

Harriett looks into my eyes again. "You don't believe me."

"I can't really commit either way right now."

"Live well, Evan."

"Thanks. You too."

She walks away.

\*

Fortunately, my hours of walking were not in a single direction, so it only takes me about thirty minutes to get back to my car, although it seems much longer without music. Credit where it's due: the nutty Cyclops-slaying lady did take my mind off my real problems for a while.

If only my encounter with Dirk had been like the encounter with the muggers. "*I quit, Dirk!*" Whack! Wooden pole to the forehead! Whack! Whack! Whack! Not hard enough to actually expose any part of his brain, but definitely hard enough to leave permanent evidence of his punishment for being a prick. (Obviously, in this fantasy I'm the one wielding the weapon, rather than Harriett. I don't need her to beat up my ex-boss for me.) I wonder if she was just messing with me? Or maybe "Slay a Cyclops" is a slang term for something. *Hey, after work do you wanna see a movie, get a couple of drinks, maybe slay a Cyclops?*

I drive home and go inside. The house still feels weird without Becky. She traveled a lot for work so I spent plenty of nights here alone, but everything seems *off* somehow. The hallways are too long. The ceiling is too low. The air conditioner is too loud.

It doesn't matter. I won't be here much longer. I can move anywhere I want now. Well, anyplace that's affordable. Maybe I'll go someplace where the cost of living is really cheap, like Arkansas. Or Mexico. Despite evidence on my high school report card to the contrary, I could learn Spanish.

I definitely need a shower, but Becky's sister Marjorie has been calling me from Seattle every night to check how I'm doing, so I should call her to let her know that I don't have my cell phone anymore. Hopefully they can transfer my number to a new one.

I pick up the handset of my phone and the beeps tell me I've got voicemail. The first call is from Human Resources, explaining that there is some paperwork to be filled out, and I should come in at my earliest convenience. The second is from Patty at work, whose cubicle was next to mine, saying that she boxed up my things and I can come up and get them, or if I call her she'll be more than happy to bring the box down to the lobby, or even the parking lot, whatever is easiest for me, and she's sorry again about Becky, and everybody is worried about me, and that Chet is finally pressure washing their driveway after literally six weeks of her telling him it needed it, and she's trying a different recipe for these oatmeal raisin cookies that she's baking but she's having second thoughts about veering away from what has worked in the past, and that she's not sure how much recording time there is in a voicemail, it's not like the olden days where you'd run out of tape, and— The third call is from me. That is, my phone.

"Evan?" Harriett asks. "Evan? Are you hearing me? Evan? Am I doing this right? Can you hear this? Respond if you can hear this."

The voicemail ends. I immediately call her back.

My cell phone rings seven times before she answers. "Evan?"

"Harriett?"

"Evan?"

"Do you have my phone?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm at home."

"Are you hearing me? Evan?"

"Yes, I hear you."

"Evan? Am I doing this right?"

"Harriett, where are you? I'll come meet you."

"Evan?"

"Tell me where you are."

"Evan?"

"I can hear you."

I hear her speaking to somebody else, then there's a male voice on the other end. "Hello?"

"Hi, I'm Evan Portin. I think you've got my cell phone."

"Yeah, yeah, okay, your friend found it, I guess. We're at the Texaco station on North Griffin. Do you know that one?"

"I can find it."

Harriett says something to him that I can't hear. "She says that she's not going to wait for you, but that she'll be traveling west."

"Thank you so much. I'm leaving now."

In twenty minutes, I drive past the gas station and continue heading west. A few blocks later I reach a point where "traveling west" could technically be northwest or southwest. I go with northwest. She can't have gone too far, so if I'm wrong, I'll backtrack.

I chose correctly. She's walking along the road next to a Wal-Mart. I pull into the right-hand lane, stop beside her, and roll down the passenger-side window. "Hi!" I say. "Do you want to get in?"

She shakes her head.

"Okay, I'll pull into the parking lot."

I turn right and park in the space nearest to where she's walking. I get out of the car, shut the door, and realize that I've left the keys in the ignition. I'm filled with horror until I also realize that I didn't lock the door, so the issue is easily resolved.

Harriett has stopped walking. She's on the sidewalk, waiting for me. As I hurry over to her, I see that she's holding both my phone and my wallet.

"Here are your stolen possessions," she says, handing them to me.

"Thank you so much!" I open my wallet and am shocked to see that even the cash is still there. "How did you get them back?"

"The criminal followed me. Apparently he sought vengeance. It did not work out the way he hoped."

I pull a twenty-dollar bill out of my wallet and extend it toward her. "Here."

"I have plentiful funds. I don't need a reward."

"Yes, you do. You saved me about eighteen hours of standing in line at the DMV."

"DMV?"

"Department of Motor Vehicles."

"Right. DMV. The place where you're licensed to operate heavy machinery." She points to my car.

"Yes. And it's filled with unhappy people. I'm exaggerating how long I'd be standing in line, and actually some of the people who work there are nice and efficient, so I shouldn't be sharing that unfair stereotype, but still, I'm very glad to have my license back. Please,

take the reward."

Harriet takes the bill from me. She unzips a small pocket in her backpack and tucks the money in there. "Thank you."

"How's your arm?"

"It felt better before it was cut."

"So how much more are you walking tonight?"

"Until I can walk no further."

"Then what?"

"Then I'll seek shelter for the night, and resume walking tomorrow."

"Well, you know, Harriett, if you let me drive you just a small way, maybe half an hour, I could put you a whole day ahead of where you are now. It would more than make up for the time you've lost."

"I cannot do that."

"I'm not gonna try anything. Not only am I mourning my wife, but I'm *completely* aware that you can kick my ass."

"I don't travel that way."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"Have you ever?"

"No."

"You've never ridden in a car?"

She shakes her head.

"They're pretty cool," I say. "I'm not trying to bother you. I really appreciate you getting my phone and wallet back, and I figured that since you've got such a long walk ahead of you, it might be nice to get twenty or thirty miles ahead."

"I was trained to travel by foot."

"All right. I was just offering."

We shake hands, and I start to walk back toward my car.

"Wait."

I turn back.

She pats her arm, under the stitches. "Perhaps there is an exception in cases of injury. The additional progress on my journey would be helpful."

I grin. "C'mon."

I pop the trunk, but she doesn't want her backpack out of her sight. I put it in the back seat, then open the passenger-side door for her. She hesitates as if about to enter a cage full of sewer rats, and then climbs inside. She flinches when I shut the door.

"What do you think?" I ask, getting behind the wheel.

"It's very claustrophobic. And it has a mild scent of regurgitated bread and cheese. The chair is very comfortable, though."

"Do you know how to fasten your seat belt?"

"I do not."

I fasten my own seat belt. She takes hold of hers and gets it right on the first try.

"My claustrophobia is worse."

I push the switch to roll down her window. "That should help. If at any point you're uncomfortable, let me know and I'll stop. I'll go slow."

I start the engine. Harriett clutches the sides of her seat. She squeezes her eyes shut as I back out of the parking space. She whispers something to herself that I can't quite hear, but it sounds like some sort of soothing mantra.

She lets out a soft yelp as we pull out onto the street.

"You okay?" I ask.

"I've never done anything this unnatural."

I'm always a careful driver, but now I'm even more attentive. I can't imagine how much it would suck to convince her to accept a ride and then get into an accident.

"So tell me about this Cyclops," I say, to get her mind off our twenty-miles-per-hour velocity. "Nothing you say will leave this car, I promise."

She doesn't open her eyes. "You don't believe that it exists, so there's no need to discuss it."

"I never said that."

"I'm perfectly aware that I sound insane to the outside world. I have no intention of trying to convince everybody that I am right. You're not one of the people who needs to believe."

"What exactly do you mean by Cyclops? When I hear that, the first thing I think of is the guy from the X-Men who shoots lasers from his eyes, but I'm pretty sure that's not who you're off to kill."

"Who are the X-Men?"

"Second, I think of a mythological creature. Giant-sized, one big eye in the center, maybe a horn."

Harriett says nothing.

"Is that it?"

She opens her eyes just to glare at me.

"You're off to slay a one-eyed giant?"

"I have trained my entire life for this journey. So when you mock me, you're mocking my *life*."

"I'm not making fun of you, I swear. I'm just asking questions. I've lived in Florida since I was six, so how would I know if there are Cyclopes in Arizona or not? Who trained you?"

"My parents."

"Where are they now?"

"They're dead. I don't wish to discuss it further."



"Okay. We don't have to talk. Do you like music?"

"Yes. But I didn't bring an instrument."

"That's fine." I turn on the radio. I flip through several stations but only find commercials, so I switch to the CD player.

My musical tastes are pretty broad. The last time I listened to a CD, I was in a death metal mood. The not-so-melodic strains of "Bodily Fluids Are Yummy" by The Rotten Eggs blast through the speakers.

"Is that music?" Harriett asks.

"Technically, yes," I say, turning down the volume.

"It sounds like they're in the midst of a mass slaughter."

"I think that's the point."

"This relaxes you?"

"It helps me blow off some steam, yeah."

"Interesting."

"What musical instrument do you play?"

"The flute and the harp."

"That's cool."

"I never thought I was an accomplished musician, but I may have underestimated my abilities."

"One more question. What's with the dress?"

Her face falls. "You don't like my dress?"

"No, it's an awesome dress. It's just not what I'd expect somebody to wear on a cross-country journey to slay something."

"I'm a trained warrior. That doesn't mean I can't look nice. I have more practical clothing if I need it, but I enjoy looking feminine."

"Makes sense. I was just curious."

Harriett looks out the window. "You're right. This is a much more efficient means of travel."

"Yep. Cars rule."

"How much further are you willing to take me?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't have anywhere to be. I'm happy to drive you for another hour or so."

I notice that her hand has now tightened on the pole.

"How about further than that?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

Am I being kidnapped?

I can't quite tell. I suppose I should just ask.

"Am I being kidnapped?"

"Yes," she says.

"Seriously?"

Harriett considers the question. "No. I don't know. No, you are not being kidnapped. I apologize. I stopped thinking properly for a moment. This has been a stressful beginning to my journey, and I should not have done that. I would never kidnap somebody. If you want to drop me off by the side of the road now, I completely understand."

"Yeah, I think I'm gonna do that."

"I completely understand."

I pull into the parking lot of a burger place. Harriett tugs at her seat belt.

"Press the button," I say, pointing to it.

Harriett presses the button and her seat belt pops free. She figures out how to open the car door without my assistance and gets out, taking her backpack and pole.

"I am truly mortified by my behavior," she says. "I hope you'll remember me for other parts of our interaction and not those few seconds of poor judgment."

"It's fine. You got my phone and wallet back. I'll remember that part."

She nods, closes the door, and resumes her walk.

I drive off.

I call to re-activate my credit card and don't even get put on hold first. Though it's been a pretty terrible day, I certainly can't complain about my customer service experiences.

I can't help but feel guilty about abandoning a woman after dark, but she's in a perfectly safe part of town. If she chooses to walk into a less safe part, it's really not my concern. My responsibility for her ended at the moment she threatened me with her death-stick.

I mean, she didn't *really* threaten me. It was pretty damn subtle as far as threats go. Still, there aren't all that many steps between "How

about further than that?" and "How does this hunting knife feel in your neck?"

I have no moral obligation to drive a delusional lady around. As far as I'm concerned, we're even. Yes, she legitimately saved me while I only *tried* to save her, but she wouldn't have needed to save me if I hadn't tried to save her first. I also wouldn't have had anything stolen if I wasn't trying to be a nice guy, so it all balances out, I think, maybe.

Yeah, I still feel like a jerk, but I'll get over it. Better to feel like a jerk than to find myself lying on the side of the road, impaled by her pole, thinking, *Y'know, Evan, the red flags were there...*

She really should not be walking to Arizona by herself. That's insane. And, yes, *she's* insane, so the logic of the quest makes sense on her side, but—impressive battle skills notwithstanding—she's going to end up seriously injured or dead or worse.

For her own protection I should call the police.

That's the right thing to do, isn't it? Call the cops, explain everything that happened, and let the professionals decide if she's mentally fit enough for a cross-country journey. I'd feel horrible if they put her away because she told the authorities that she was on her way to kill a Cyclops, but maybe she should be detained, to keep her safe.

Hell, maybe she's an escaped mental patient.

Maybe she's a really messed-up and deranged mental patient, and she left a trail of corpses between the asylum and the park where I found her. Maybe she was able to sew up her wound so easily because she's used to sewing the skin of her victims onto her own face.

Obviously, I'm reaching a bit.

Still, am I a crappy human being if I don't let somebody know what happened? Can I cope with the possibility of Harriett turning up dead in a ditch?

I don't know. Calling the police truly seems like a dick move.

What I'd like right now is some sort of sign. I don't believe in signs, but one would be appreciated anyway. It doesn't have to be bright lights across the sky spelling out, *Hey, Evan, You're Right, Calling The Cops Would Be A Total Dick Move*; just any kind of guidance from a supreme being or the fates or whatever the hell forces are in the business of giving signs to people who need them.

There is no sign.

So I drive home, feeling like a complete scumbag. I should feel relieved that I'm not currently being held at pole-point in my own car, but I don't. I feel as if I've let her down.

Which is nuts. Even if I decide to chauffeur her all the way across the country, this journey is a waste of time. The best possible

outcome, the ending where we have achieved the maximum realistic degree of success in this mission, still involves reaching Arizona and having her say, "Oh, shit, I guess there's no Cyclops here."

That's the important thing for me to remember as I wallow in guilt: I'd be helping her with a task that does not actually need to be completed. There is no real Cyclops to slay. She's walking two thousand miles for nothing.

And I, being a complete emotional wreck, am not the guy who is going to successfully talk her out of this nonsense.

So I've done my part.

As I pull into my driveway, it begins to rain.

This doesn't count as a sign. I'm in Florida. It rains here. And I asked for a sign twenty minutes ago. If the rain had started immediately after my request, I might have said, "Whoa, somebody is trying to tell me something!" but this is purely a coincidence.

The only thing it means is that Harriett is walking alone at night in the rain.

*Crap.*

I turn off the headlights.

*Crap.*

I turn off the engine.

*Crap.*

I unfasten my seat belt.

*Crap.*

*Go inside, all sense of reason tells me. She's not your problem. There's alcohol inside your home—use it.*

I refasten my seat belt.

*What the hell did I just tell you? asks my sense of reason. Take that seat belt off. You've got much more important things to deal with. Remember how you quit your job today? How about we rank that a little higher on the priority scale?*

I turn on the engine.

*Are you frickin' kidding me? I know you've been through a lot, but dude, this isn't the way to handle your breakdown. If you want to do some sort of charitable service, why not volunteer at a homeless shelter or plant some trees? No good can come of this. Lots of bad can.*

I turn on the headlights.

*Fine, whatever, I'm not your mother. You're not gonna be able to find her again anyway, so if you want to waste gas, that's your decision. Have a nice life, dipshit.*

I'm not going to spend very long looking for her. I'll pass the burger place and spend, at most, fifteen minutes driving around. If I don't find her, I'll return home with a shiny clear conscience.

I genuinely don't know why I'm doing this. I could need the

distraction in my life, or I could be suicidal, or it could be any of a thousand points in-between.

It's pouring outside. I'm sure she's found shelter for the night.

I call Marjorie and tell her that I'm hanging in there. I decide not to tell her about quitting my job or Harriett. Marjorie is a good sister-in-law and would want to discuss both of these issues at length. She felt terrible flying back to Seattle so soon after the funeral, but though my brother-in-law Chip is a good guy, their three young children are hyperactive and exhibit no evidence of concern for their personal safety, and every day that he was alone caring for them increased the chances that she would return home to one or more dead kids. I can hear them screaming in the background right now. Marjorie doesn't protest when I cut the call short.

I drive by the burger place. Harriett will have gone at least a couple of miles past that, but if she's still walking in the rain and has stayed on this particular street, I may find her.

Hopefully I won't find her, because this whole situation is ridiculous.

*Okay, says my sense of reason, I thought I was done, but I'm going to make one last plea. Go home. Go. Home. Home is where you should be. If Becky were alive, do you think she'd think this was an intelligent thing for you to be doing?*

Becky was a lot more rational than I am. She would have called the police right after the mugging, regardless of any inconvenience it may have caused Harriett.

*But let's fast-forward through all of that and stop at right here, right now. What would Becky do?*

She'd say, "We can't just leave her out in the rain."

*Damn it, you're right. Carry on.*

Luck is with me. Whether it's good luck or bad, I don't know, but there's Harriett, walking in the rain. She's got a black umbrella that is thrashing around in the wind. I pull up next to her, stop the car, and lean over to open the passenger-side door.

Before I say anything, Harriett closes her umbrella, takes off her backpack, and gets inside. She's absolutely drenched. "Thank you," she says, closing the door. "I thought my umbrella would do a better job of serving its purpose."

"I couldn't just leave you out there like that. I guess I should've grabbed a towel from home."

"It's fine," she says. She takes an orange towel out of her backpack and dries off her face. "I apologize for dampening your vehicle."

"My vehicle will be okay."

She puts on her seatbelt and I resume driving.

"I swear I'm not making fun of you," I say, "but I've got a lot more

questions about the Cyclops thing. If you truly don't want to talk about it, I'll respect your wishes, but I feel like there's a ton of stuff left for me to learn."

"You can ask whatever you want. If it's not appropriate for me to answer, I won't."

"Where's the Cyclops?"

"Arizona."

"Right, you told me that, but specifically where? Which city?"

"I don't know," says Harriett, rubbing the towel through her hair.

"You don't know?"

"Correct."

"So, uh, is somebody going to tell you when you get closer?"

"I'm guiding myself."

"And how does that work?"

"It's simply a feeling. I thought I had to walk the whole way or lose the path and have to start over, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

"So it's like an internal GPS?"

"You know perfectly well that I don't know what you mean by GPS."

"An internal compass?"

"To avoid making this too convoluted I'll say yes."

"Okay," I say. "You're traveling based on a gut feeling of the right direction. I'll go with that. Next question: how do you know there's a Cyclops?"

"It's written."

"Where?"

Harriett sighs. "It's a prophecy, all right? I'm doing this based on a prophecy. Are you happy now?"

"I'm neither happier nor less happy."

"It's on a scroll. A papyrus scroll with ink that may or may not be blood. Not an ancient scroll, but my parents had it before I was born."

"And you're the Chosen One?"

"I would never display such ego as to call myself the Chosen One. I have a destiny. That doesn't mean I require a pretentious name."

"At least you've got a career path. I changed majors three times in college."

"You swore you wouldn't make fun of me."

"That wasn't making fun of you," I say. "It was a joke. They're not the same thing. I apologize anyway."

"Apology accepted."

"So, a prophecy on a scroll told your parents to train you to kill a Cyclops?"

"Basically, yes."

"How hard is it to kill one of those things? I watched you beat up a few muggers. Is a Cyclops more of a challenge?"

"Significantly. You can't slay a Cyclops on your own. Along the way, I'll be gathering a band of three heroes and acquiring a crucial weapon from the bottom of a well."

"Where along the way?"

"I'm not certain."

"Do they know you're coming?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, well, again, I promise that I'm not making fun of you, but in this century we've got something called social media. You could gather your band of heroes there, and let them know you were on your way. It would be a lot easier for everybody."

"This is not supposed to be easy. We're off to slay a monster that has overtaken an entire town."

"Right, right." I'm not sure if I should let the whole thing drop, or continue to discuss her madness. I decide to discuss her madness. Maybe if she realizes the gaps in logic of this venture, she'll become saner. "Wouldn't a Cyclops overtaking a town be a time-sensitive issue?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'd think a Cyclops could devour a lot of people while you were walking across the United States. Maybe he's been eating people since before you were born. Why spend so much time training you? I'm not trying to be obnoxious and poke holes in your story, but if there's a legitimate Cyclops threat I don't get why there isn't more urgency."

Harriett nods. "Trust me, I have thought about that for most of my life. If it were up to me, I would have started on this journey when I was eight years old. But the truth is, I will arrive when the time is right."

"It feels like the right time would be before people start getting eaten."

"And hopefully the prophecy agrees with you."

"Am I offending you with all of this nitpicking?"

"Not yet. I'll knock you unconscious with my pole when you do." My hands tighten on the steering wheel.

"That was humor," Harriett informs me.

"I sort of knew that."

"It's not my most well-honed skill. I've always focused on other areas."

"We can't all be funny."

"Are you funny?"

"It depends on who you ask."

"What if I asked your late wife?"

"She would say yes, but she would sort of roll her eyes while she was saying it. At least if I were in the room."

"How did she die?"

"Cancer."

"Was it quick? I mean, by the standards of the disease?"

"Not really."

"Does that make it better, because you had time to say goodbye? Or would it have been better if she was taken away completely without warning?"

"That's one ghoulish question."

"Was it inappropriate?"

I shake my head. "Nah, it's okay. From a purely selfish perspective, I wanted every minute I could spend with her. For her sake, I wish it had been quicker. A middle ground between 'no warning' and 'extended suffering' would have been nice."

"I can relate to that."

"Can we go back to talking about the Cyclops?"

Harriett shrugs. "You're the one providing transportation."

"I know that you've been pretty isolated from the rest of the world, but these days there are satellites everywhere. They can read a license plate from outer space. How could a creature take over an entire town and you're the only one who knows about it?"

"Perhaps it's not a very large town."

"Still..."

"And perhaps I'm not the only one who knows."

"Still..."

"And perhaps it hasn't happened yet."

"That's the most logical answer, which is scary because that's a scenario where we're predicting the future."

"Correct. That's what prophecies do."

"What if it's wrong?"

"If it's wrong, then the town is safe."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Are you asking if I *want* people to be enslaved by a monster?"

"No, no, I'm just asking if..." I feel like my line of questioning is becoming unintentionally antagonistic, so I don't finish my sentence.

"If there's no Cyclops, then yes, all of my preparation was for nothing. I've wasted my life. I'll have extreme difficulty coping with that revelation. But it's something for me to deal with at the end of the journey, not the beginning."

"I can't argue with that."

Harriett looks out the side window. "We're travelling quickly."

"Should I slow down?"



"No. I like this. It's very efficient."

"You should try a plane."

"No, thank you."

"Do you still feel like we're going in the right direction?"

"Yes. I'm certain that we are." She dabs at her face with the towel.

"Did I mention that this seat is very comfortable?"

"It really isn't, not compared to other cars, but it's better than walking in the rain."

Harriett closes her eyes.

A few moments later, I wonder if she's fallen asleep.

She can't possibly trust me well enough to have fallen asleep in my car, can she?

Trust is probably irrelevant. She's simply not scared of me. She knows that if I reached over there, she'd snap awake and shatter my wrist into eight hundred bone fragments.

Should I wake her up or let her sleep?

I'll wake her up in half an hour.

I spend the next half hour thinking about how crazy this is. After Becky died, I knew my life would change, but I didn't think it would change *this* much. What the hell am I doing?

Exactly thirty minutes later, I decide not to wake her up. It's still raining, and she looks peaceful.

After another half hour, we're out of the rain, but she still looks peaceful.

*Screw it*, I think. *I have nowhere else to be*, and I keep driving.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Harriett opens her eyes as I shut off the engine.

"Where are we?" she asks.

"Near Tallahassee."

She looks at her wristwatch, which is one evolutionary step away from a timepiece that she'd keep in her pocket attached to a chain. It's just after 2:00 a.m.

"Why did you take me so far?"

"It's not that far. We're still in Florida. I figured you could use the rest."

We're at a gas station off of I-10 West. If I hadn't needed to refuel, I would've driven even longer. I should be exhausted, but I'm wide-awake, and not in a jittery "too many energy drinks" way.

Harriett gets out of the car. I can't tell if she's pleased or upset.

"I thought about waking you up to make sure we were still going the right way, but this is the way to Arizona, so I assumed that we were."

Now she looks a bit panicked. Damn it. I should have woken her up. What was I thinking?

"I need to use a public restroom," she says, walking toward the gas station.

I start to pump gas. I have to say, this drive has really helped me feel better. Not about losing my wife, but about quitting my job. I'm no longer sick to my stomach. I can foresee a future where I'm not consumed by thoughts of *what have I done? Oh, God, what have I done?*

When the tank is full, I head inside for my own restroom break. The men's room smells almost too pleasant (strawberries, with a hint of lilac) and when I emerge Harriett is gazing at the row of candy with fascination.

"Look at all of these," she says. "Can you believe it?"

"Have you had candy before?"

"Of course I have. Chocolate is wonderful. But I never imagined that so many varieties existed!"

I walk over to the next aisle and grab a bag of beef jerky and a bottle of water. When I return, Harriett has her arms full of sugary treats.

"Need a basket?" I ask.

"Yes, please."

I bring her a basket. She dumps her armload of goodies into it, then starts adding more.

"You know, we're not at Willy Wonka's factory, where it's a once in a lifetime chance. This stuff is available pretty much anywhere."

"Whose factory?"

"I'll meet you outside," I say.

I pay for my jerky and water and walk back to the car. Harriett comes out a few minutes later, holding a bulging plastic bag.

"In my family, candy was reserved for special occasions. And special occasions were rare. I have no plans to exhibit wild behavior in other areas, but I am going to have as much chocolate as I want."

"You know it'll make you sick, right?"

"I'll cease eating before that happens."

I grin and open the car door. It's not my job to protect her from an upset tummy.

"When do you need to be back home?" Harriett asks.

"I don't."

"You don't have responsibilities?"

"Not anymore. I quit my job right before I met you."

Harriett stares at me for a moment. "Then you must be the one written of in the prophecy. The Companion. Your destiny is to accompany me."

"Ummmm..."

She smiles. "That, also, was humor."

"Good one. You got a genuine jolt of panic out of me."

"I'd like to discuss business with you. I'm extremely pleased by the discovery that I don't need to walk the entire way in order to follow the correct path. That will make things infinitely easier. What would you charge to transport me to my destination?"

"Oh, uh, I don't think I can..."

"I understand."

But maybe I should. Harriett may be crazy, but at this point I feel safe in saying that she's not "steal your eyeballs while you sleep" crazy. And she was *raised* crazy—she's not mentally unstable herself. Maybe this trip would be good for me. Maybe a few days to clear my head is exactly what I need before I start worrying about what I'm going to do with the rest of my life.

"I wouldn't charge you anything," I say. "I'd ask you to pay for expenses. Food, gas, and hotel."

Harriett nods. "That's more than fair."

"But I have to be completely honest with you. I don't believe that there's a Cyclops. I'm sorry; I just don't."

"That's entirely understandable. You barely know me. If you immediately believed my story with no evidence, I'd have to assume that you were delusional, and I wouldn't want to be locked in a moving vehicle with you."

"Well, good."

She extends her hand. "It's an agreement, then."

"I reserve the right to drop you off at any time."

"Understood."

I shake her hand. "It's an agreement."

\*

"So delicious," says Harriett, licking traces of chocolate off her upper lip. "So, so delicious."

"You should really pace yourself."

She tears open another package. "This one has chocolate *and* peanut butter," she announces. "What kind of mad genius would think of such a thing?"

"And that's not even the highest quality chocolate," I inform her. "We'll have to stop by a real candy shop on the way, if you can still squeeze out of the car door by then."

"I understand why so much of the population is overweight." She takes a bite, and then makes a noise that I'm positive she doesn't realize sounds like sexual ecstasy.

She finishes it up, then dabs at the corners of her eyes.

"Are you crying?" I ask.

"Certainly not."

"Seriously, are you crying over the chocolate?"

"I never imagined that something so delicious could exist," she says with a sniffle. "I've been deprived for so long. I don't think that what my parents gave me on special occasions was even real chocolate. I want to melt this down and bathe in it."

"We're kind of getting into weird territory now."

"Why?" she asks. "Why wouldn't you bathe in chocolate if it's so readily available?"

"Just don't start smearing it on yourself. What you do outside of my car is your business."

"Don't worry. I have decorum."

\*

Harriett is hunched over by the side of the interstate, wiping her mouth post-vomit. I'm a horrible, terrible, evil person for being amused by this.

"Are you done?" I ask.

"I'm not certain. I don't believe so."

"Take your time."

She vomits again. I hope she's not getting any in her hair.

"I've got some napkins whenever you're ready," I say.

"I'm ready."

I walk over and hand her the napkins. She spits a couple of times, then wipes her mouth.

"Have we learned a little lesson?" I ask.

She raises an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting that it wasn't worth it?"

"I guess not."

"The stomach pain and regurgitation were a small price to pay," says Harriett, returning to the car. "I'll let some time pass to give my body an opportunity to recover, but chocolate bars and I are far from through."

\*

Harriett sleeps until sunrise. Now we have a bit of a problem, because I'm finally feeling the impact of staying up all night, and it's not as if Harriett can take over the driving. We should have planned this better.

"New Orleans," she says, without opening her eyes.

"What?"

"Our first hero lives in New Orleans. It's a city in Louisiana. It just came to me. Is that on the way?"

"Yeah, actually, it is. We can stay on I-10. It's a little over an hour away."

"Perfect."

"How did that come to you? Did you hear a voice in your head that said 'New Orleans'?"

"Nothing that blatant. It's a feeling. I'm not sure if I can describe it accurately."

"When will you know who the person is?"

"I'm not certain."

"So, I mean, could we end up driving around for weeks trying to

find him or her?"

"I hope not."

"Do you have a Plan B?"

"No."

"Should we brainstorm one? We've got an hour."

Harriett shakes her head. "For now, I'm going to consider this a one-path journey."

"New Orleans is fun. I wouldn't mind spending a couple of days there, if it takes you a while to find the person. In the meantime, I hate to say this, but I'm going to need to rest for a bit. I'm fine with sleep deprivation. I just need a couple of hours to recharge."

"Of course. I'll watch over you during your slumber."

"You don't actually need to watch over me. We'll pull into a rest area and I'll be fine."

"I feel like I should."

"Why?"

"It's just a feeling."

"What kind of feeling?"

"A feeling as if I should watch over you during your slumber."

"I'm not comfortable with that feeling."

"You don't trust me to protect you?"

"I totally trust you to protect me. I don't like the idea that you think you need to."

"Nobody is pursuing us, if that's what you're worried about."

"I never thought anybody was," I say. "Although now you've kind of implanted the idea."

"I shouldn't have said anything. I won't actually watch over you. I'll merely sit in the car while you sleep."

"I can make it to New Orleans without falling asleep at the wheel, no problem. Maybe we should do that, to get you closer to the, uh, feeling of where the hero is."

"I'd rather you be as well-rested as possible while operating this vehicle."

Nine miles later, we pull into a rest area.

"I'm going to walk around and be one with nature for a while," says Harriett. "Sleep well."

She gets out of the car, taking her backpack and mugger-whacking stick with her. I recline back the seat, close my eyes, and am asleep within seconds.

I wake up from a dream about Becky. It's a happy dream, though the details vanish as soon as I realize that I'm still in a Louisiana rest area.

Harriett is seated on a bench next to the restrooms, reading a paperback book. She immediately realizes that I'm awake, so I assume she was keeping a close eye on me. She closes the book and stands up.

I take my cell phone out of my pocket and check the time. 1:42 p.m. I feel bad that she waited around for me to sleep so long, but, hey, at least I saved her a crapload of walking time. She shoves the book into her backpack as she walks toward the car. There was a muscular, shirtless guy on the cover.

Harriett opens the door, climbs inside, and hands me a bag of potato chips. "I purchased this for you. I tried an identical bag earlier. They're incredible."

"Thanks. What were you reading?"

"*Lassoing The Cowboy*. I thought it was a western but I was mistaken."

"Are you reading a smut novel?"

"It's a relationship novel."

"Yeah, right."

"I bought it from a woman with six children. It's surprisingly engaging so far. My usual reading material is quite different."

"You didn't have to let me sleep so long."

"And you didn't have to let *me* sleep so long."

"We should coordinate our schedules."

"Agreed."

"Well, give me a few minutes to stretch and use the restroom, and we'll get back on the road."

I pee at a urinal used by men with haphazard targeting skills, then wash my hands and face in the sink. I check myself out in the mirror. It's the most rested I've looked since Becky died, although stubble has never looked good on me. I'll have to pick up a razor. Also a toothbrush, dental floss, deodorant, change of clothes...I really wasn't planning on this being a full-fledged road trip.

"Any new feelings on the hero?" I ask, as we pull back onto the highway.

"Nothing yet. Would you like me to open your bag of potato slices for you so that you're not distracted while you drive?"

"Nah. The food in New Orleans is amazing. Have you ever had a muffaletta?"

Harriett shakes her head.

"Oh my God. It's got ham, salami, mortadella, two kinds of cheese, and this olive salad that will blow your freaking mind. It's the sandwich equivalent of chocolate. Have you ever had gumbo?"

"No."

"See, that's not okay. Your life won't truly begin until lunch. What kind of stuff do you normally eat?"

"Various meats. Various vegetables. Various dairy products. I had no complaints."

"You're going to be three hundred pounds by the time we leave this city. We'll basically just be able to catapult you at the Cyclops and crush him flat."

"I'm very much looking forward to a muffaletta."

\*

"Turn right," says Harriett, as we get close to the French Quarter. I take a right.

"No, I apologize, it should have been a left turn."

"No problem. I'll circle the block."

I drive three-quarters of the way back around the block before Harriett says, "No, I was wrong. Your original turn was correct."

"Okay."

"At least I think it was."

"Okay."

"Can you drive more slowly?"

"Not without pissing off the other drivers."

"I may need to walk."

"That's fine. I'll park somewhere."

Finding a place to park in the French Quarter is hell on earth, but I eventually accomplish the task and we get out of the car. Harriett takes her backpack and pole.

We walk around for about forty-five minutes, and my stomach is rumbling enough that I almost suggest we stop for lunch. But I don't want to throw her off the scent, even though I don't believe there is an actual scent.

"Here," she says, stopping in front of a touristy gift shop. "This is the right place. The first hero is inside."

It's a pretty lame gift shop. The front window is filled with T-shirts about the merriment of alcoholism. All of the alligator heads on sticks I could ever want are on display by the open front door.

The shop has exactly one customer, a morbidly obese man chuckling at a toy where you can jiggle a lever and make a plastic woman's breasts bounce. An exhausted looking woman with silver hair in a tight perm, probably in her sixties, stands behind the counter.

"Her," says Harriett, pointing.



"Don't point."

"It's her."

"Are you sure? She seems kind of old."

"Without any doubt. I don't know her name, but that is absolutely her, no question in my mind."

"All right, then." I'm not sure what I was expecting. Somebody much younger. Or somebody in a full suit of armor, holding a sword.

Well, no, what I was expecting was nobody. I can't help but feel that this conversation has the potential to be extremely awkward.

"Do you want me to give you some privacy?" I ask.

"Not unless this makes you uncomfortable."

"Nope." It does, actually, but I feel like I should probably be there to intervene if this starts to go in a "Get the hell out of my shop before I call the police" direction.

Harriett walks into the shop. I reluctantly follow.

## CHAPTER SIX

Harriett strides up to the front counter.

"How may I help you today?" asks the woman with a smile. Visibly exhausted or not, her enthusiasm for helping Harriett with something today seems genuine.

"My name is Harriett Lancaster."

"Pleased to meet you."

Harriett just stares at her. I assume that she's hoping for a spark of recognition. There isn't one.

The staring goes on a bit too long before the woman speaks. "Were you looking for anything in particular?"

"Yes," says Harriett. "You."

I silently wince. Harriett has now officially become creepy. I feel like I should step in and try to steer the conversation into a not-quite-so-unnerving direction, but it's not my place to interfere quite yet.

The woman's smile disappears. "Now what's he done?"

"Who?"

"Tell me why you're here."

Harriett unzips her backpack. The woman slides her hand beneath the counter, and I am ninety-nine percent certain that she's going for a silent alarm button, a baseball bat, or a gun. We're now at the part where I should intervene.

Harriett takes out a scroll. She gently places it on the counter and removes the twine that was tied around it. She unrolls it and holds it down by the edges. "Read this."

The woman glances down at the scroll. She reads for about five seconds before looking back up at Harriett. "What's this?"

"Does it make you feel anything?"

"Does it make me *feel* anything? It makes me feel like you walked into the wrong shop. Sorry, ma'am, but we don't allow solicitors here. I've had my own religion for quite some time, thanks."

"I'm not here to change your religion," Harriett insists.

"Well, I'm here to change your facial structure if you don't get out of my store. If you want to buy something, that's great; otherwise, move along."

Okay, we've now had our first threat of violence! I step over to the

counter. "I apologize," I tell the woman. "We're just going to look at the T-shirts."

"We've got more against the back wall," the woman informs me.

"Wait," Harriett says. *Please, please, please don't mention the Cyclops*, I think. "Your name is Jeannie, right?"

"Yes."

*Please, please, please don't say anything about how you knew her name from a feeling deep within yourself.*

"Jeannie, just read the scroll. It will take two minutes of your time. And my companion will buy a shirt, even if it is not a good value for the price."

The guy who was playing with the plastic big-boobie-girl toy exits the shop.

Jeannie looks back down at the scroll. Her hand remains out of sight beneath the counter, but I'm going to be optimistic and assume that if she does have a gun, she'll wave it at us and tell us to get the hell out of her shop before making the decision to blow somebody's head off.

She reads for about fifteen more seconds, then looks up and glares at me. "Go pick out your damn shirt."

I nod and walk to the back of the shop. My hair isn't thinning yet, otherwise I would be all over the shirt that informs the public that it's not a bald spot, it's a solar panel for a sex machine. Instead, I go with a light blue shirt that says simply, "New Orleans."

I return to the counter. Harriett rolls up the scroll.

"So, what did you think?" Harriett asks.

"I think this better be a hidden-camera TV show, because I'm going to be seriously pissed if you're peddling this nonsense in my store without me getting any free publicity out of it."

"How did it make you feel?"

"It made me feel angry and annoyed, like a busy store-owner who's wasted her time." She reaches out to me. "Let me ring up your shirt."

I hand her the shirt.

"Please," says Harriett. "I need to know if it stirred up any feelings inside of you."

"You want to know what feelings it stirred up? It stirred up the kind of feelings you get when some strange lady comes in to your place of business and makes you read a damn scroll saying that your damn destiny is to slay a damn Cyclops."

"And those feelings are...?" asks Harriett, hopefully.

"That this is bullshit! You brought bullshit into my store!"

"It's not balderdash," says Harriett.

"That's fourteen dollars and thirty-eight cents," Jeannie tells me.

This shirt was supposed to be on sale for ten bucks, but I don't point out the error. Harriett unzips a pocket of her backpack and gives Jeannie a twenty. Jeannie holds it up to the light to inspect it, then counts out the change.

"Do you think we could buy you dinner?" Harriett asks. "I understand that muffalettas are a flavorful local delicacy."

"No, you can't buy me a damn muffaletta. What you can do is take your shirt and get the hell out of my store. I don't have time for this."

"Your level of hostility seems disproportionate to the amount of your time we've wasted," says Harriett. "Are you sure you didn't feel anything when you read the scroll? Perhaps there's a feeling of recognition that is scaring you. We can talk about this."

Jeannie gives her a smile that is about one percent as genuine as the smile she gave us when we first entered her shop. "You don't seem rock-stupid," she says. "So explain to me what you thought was going to happen here."

"I thought you'd read the scroll and realize that it was true."

"Mmm-hmm. I'm sixty-seven years old. You thought I'd grab me a sword and run off on some Cyclops hunt?"

"That would be the optimal outcome, yes. But I wouldn't expect you to provide your own sword."

"So you really thought I'd just leave my shop, leave my grandson, and go on a merry ol' journey with you?"

"No. I thought you'd ask your other employees to run the shop in your absence. I didn't know your family situation, but I assumed that if there were child-care issues that a spouse or other relatives could provide supervision."

"My only employee is my grandson. I'd be lucky if he didn't burn the damn place down."

"Some children rise to the occasion when given responsibility."

"You are one crazy bitch, you know that? You need to take your shirt and your scroll and get out of here before I call the cops. Get out. Go to the next store in line."

"There's no other store," says Harriett. "You're the one we seek."

"I mean it. Move along."

"What if we bought an alligator head?" I ask.

"If you buy a gator head, you can stick around for as long as it takes to pick one, but no longer, and if you mention that damn scroll again I'll beat your ass with it."

"With the scroll or the gator head?" I ask.

"The gator head."

I walk over to the display and pretend that I'm comparing and contrasting the different models.

"I'm not certain what I expected from you," Harriett says. "I've had

my entire life to train for this. I hoped that you had been training as well. I know how this all must sound to somebody who wasn't acclimated to the idea as a young girl." She gestures to me. "He doesn't believe me either."

"Then he's not as dumb as he looks."

I want to inform Jeannie that I don't look dumb, then I remember that I'm not six years old.

"If you change your mind, please contact us," says Harriett.

"How do I do that? Talk into a crystal ball?"

I return to the counter with my alligator head. I take out one of my business cards for work, cross out the no-longer-valid phone number, and write in my cell number. I slide it over to Jeannie.

"I'm not going to call you," she says.

"That's fine. Keep it anyway."

"It's going in the trash as soon as you leave."

"I understand."

Harriett turns and walks out of the store, but not before I see a tear trickling down her cheek.

Jeannie rings up the alligator head. "She must be damn good in bed for you to deal with that level of nuts."

"We're not sleeping together. She's just a friend."

"Uh-huh. You'd better be getting some friendly benefits if you're spending all day hearing about Cyclopes and shit."

I've never played the "dead wife" card, but I think now is the time. I tap my wedding ring.

"My wife died of breast cancer two weeks ago," I say. "I'm not looking for any 'friendly benefits.'"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Cancer's a goddamn rotten dirty whore, isn't it?"

"It sure is."

"I'm not trying to disrespect your friend. But when she comes into my shop with some damn prophecy scroll, sorry, I'm not going to play along. You aren't doing her any favors yourself."

I shrug. "Maybe not. It gives her a purpose."

"Yeah, well, raising my grandson and selling cheap crap to tourists gives me a purpose, and it's an *actual* purpose."

"So...because I have to ask, you definitely didn't feel anything when you read the scroll, right?"

"No, I didn't feel anything! Are you serious?"

"Just checking."

Jeannie sighs. "Sorry about your wife. I'll give you twenty percent off the gator head."

I take a bite of my delicious muffaletta sandwich. So good. Becky loved them even more than I do, and I associate it with happy memories of her. I was worried that it might make me feel sad and lonely, but, no, it reminds me of sitting outside of a bookstore that had just barely enough of a canopy to keep us dry in the downpour, as we shared a sandwich and a can of root beer. I love that memory.

Harriett hasn't taken a bite yet. She looks heartbroken.

"I'm sorry she didn't go for the idea," I say.

"Me too."

I wonder what Jeannie would've said if she knew that the original plan was for them to walk across the country? It probably would have been something impolite.

"You should try to enjoy your sandwich. Then we'll figure out what to do next."

"There's nothing to figure out."

"So, you're cancelling the trip?"

"Absolutely not. I'm proceeding without her."

"Are you sure you had the right person?"

"I was as sure as I could possibly be," she says. "I still feel sure. It doesn't matter if I'm wrong, because if I am, I have no way to find the right hero."

"Will that mess up the prophecy?"

"I don't know. We're going to pretend that it won't."

"Is it possible—and I'm only playing Devil's advocate here—that this means the scroll is just some writing on papyrus, and not an actual prophecy?"

Harriett shrugs. "It's possible."

"So then is it possible that the best next step is to...you know, reevaluate?"

"No. It is not. I'm not going to abandon my destiny just because some irritable old woman in a gift shop rejects her own."

"I suppose we could kidnap her."

"Was that humor?"

"Yes."

"Actually, it's not a terrible idea in concept, though her continual attempts to escape would give us one more thing to worry about while we were trying to slay the Cyclops."

"It's a terrible idea on every conceivable level."

"Perhaps we should talk to her grandson. Find out if she's ever mentioned this sort of destiny, even in passing."

"I'd rather not have a restraining order placed against me. Potential employers look at that kind of thing."

"So, onward. We'll do it without her." Harriett finally takes a bite of her sandwich. "Goodness. That is literally the most flavors I've ever experienced in a single mouthful of food."

"Tasty?"

"Very."

"We'll take the other halves with us. They're even better when the bread has had time to soak up the oil. Save room for gumbo."

\*

Harriett does not enjoy the gumbo.

"That was like hellfire on my tongue," says Harriett, swishing a drink of water around in her mouth.

"Don't you use spices at home?"

"Of course we do. Salt *and* pepper. I don't understand why you would want to ignite your mouth. Do people really consider that a pleasurable sensation?"

"Yeah. I love spicy food."

"I can still feel it dissolving my taste buds."

"You only had one bite."

"Am I blistered?" Harriett sticks her tongue out at me.

"No, you're fine."

"Chocolate is superior."

Harriett is ready to go, but I've proposed the idea that we spend the night in New Orleans. That way, if her feeling about the correct person does change, she'll still be around to act upon it. This will also allow us to get on the same sleep schedule, and to drive all day instead of all night. Plus, I love New Orleans.

She still seems bummed out, but she takes delight in the street musicians and the artists selling their work. We go on a cemetery tour, where Harriett is fascinated by the offerings that people leave on some of the above ground graves.

We walk down Bourbon Street. Harriett pauses in front of one of the strip clubs.

"What sort of business in this?" she asks.

"Naked women."

Harriett raises an eyebrow. "So, we're to feel sorry for their lack of clothing? It's like a charity?"

"No, you're just supposed to look at them."

"It seems undignified."

"It is."

"Do you visit often?"

The second-to-last time we were here, I bought Becky a lap dance. It didn't turn her bisexual, but she did give me a lap dance of my own when we got back to the hotel. I decide that this is not information to share with Harriett at the current time.

"Nah."

"I've no interest in it myself, but I'd wait outside."

"I'm good. Should probably mourn my wife a while longer before I start hitting the strip clubs."

"That's sound logic."

It's starting to get dark. Neither Becky nor I were heavy drinkers, but we certainly enjoyed a few choice beverages on Bourbon Street after dark. Considering Harriett's lack of self-control with the chocolate, I feel that it's best not to introduce her to a Hurricane.

Instead, we walk around for a while longer, then return to the car. We drive out of the French Quarter, where the hotels are way too expensive, and stop at a cheap motel just outside of the city limits.

"I don't see a good spot to pitch my tent," says Harriett. "It's all pavement."

"You're not going to sleep in a tent."

"In the car, then?"

"If you want to. But we're going to be spending all day tomorrow in the car, so I recommend getting a room and sleeping in a real bed."

Harriett considers this. "It would be inappropriate for us to share a bed."

"We're not going to share a bed. This place has lots of beds. We'll each have our own room."

"Oh. That sounds lovely."

"Do you have a credit card?"

"No."

"We'll put it on mine. You can just give me the cash."

"All right." She unzips the pocket in her backpack, and for the first time takes out an enormous roll of bills. If they're all twenties like the top bill, then she must have...well, I'm not good at calculating how much money is in a roll of bills. A lot. Thousands.

She peels off the top bill, revealing a hundred dollar bill underneath.

"How much is a room?" she asks.

"The sign said forty. This isn't going to be a great motel."

She hands me the hundred. "That's for both rooms. Was the gasoline more than twenty?"

"Yeah, but don't worry about it."

She gives me another hundred. "I'm paying for these things, as per our agreement."

It's pretty ridiculous for me to feel guilty about taking money from



her, considering that this whole trip is for her benefit. "We'll put the rest of it toward the next tank."

I get our rooms, which are right next to each other on the second floor. Harriett tosses her backpack on the bed and looks around her room, fascinated.

"Do you want me to show you how to work the television?" I ask.

"Isn't it a vessel of evil?"

"Depends on what you watch." I hand her the remote control.

"Basically, these two buttons change the channel, and these two buttons control the volume. Just flip around until you see something that looks interesting."

"Understood."

"Knock on my door when you wake up, and we'll head off."

"I will. Thank you, Evan. You've been very kind to me."

"Anytime. Get some sleep. Don't order any pay-per-view movies."

I go to my own room and give Becky's sister Marjorie a quick call to let her know that everything is fine. I tell her that I'm on a road trip to clear my head, but decide not to tell her that I'm traveling with a lady who wants to kill a Cyclops, which she might find peculiar.

Then I take a long, hot shower. I bought new socks and underwear, along with some basic toiletry items and a phone charger, so I'm in good shape for tomorrow.

I towel off, put on my new underwear, and climb into bed. It's a more comfortable bed than I would've expected, with no springs digging into my back and no cockroaches writhing beneath the sheets, so I close my eyes and within a couple of minutes I've— There's a knock at the door.

I get out of bed. I consider pulling on my jeans, but Harriett is strong, I think she'll somehow be able to recover from the sight of me in boxers.

I open the door. Three men are standing outside. They look like the kind of gentlemen who break thumbs over unpaid debt.

The man in the center is wearing an eye patch.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Is this Harriett's "Cyclops?"

How can he *not* be?

When I have the rare experience of seeing somebody with an eye patch on the same day that I have the even rarer experience of spending time with somebody who's hunting a Cyclops, I have to assume that the two elements are connected.

"May I help you?" I ask.

"Can we come inside?" Eye Patch Man asks. He's probably about fifty, with sunken features and a thin gray mustache. The men flanking him look twenty years younger. The one on his left has chubby cheeks that aren't quite adorable enough to balance out his beady, glaring eyes. The one on the right looks like he's been punched a lot, but has punched back even more.

Though I want to speak with them, they definitely don't look like the kind of men you want to let into your motel room. "Let's talk downstairs," I say. "Give me a second to put on some pants."

All three of them take a step forward. "Here is fine," Eye Patch Man says to me.

The two younger men push past me. I step out of the way, because I'm not inclined to put up a fight against three thumb-breaking drug dealers or whatever these guys are. They aren't dressed well enough to be mobsters.

Eye Patch Man steps inside my room and closes the door behind him.

I hope I don't look as scared as I feel. If this were a comic strip, you'd be able to see actual droplets of sweat flying off my head.

"We ain't here to hurt anyone," Eye Patch Man assures me, unconvincingly. "We just wanna talk."

"Fine," I say. I wish my cell phone was tucked into my boxers instead of lying on the nightstand.

"Have a seat."

"I'll stand."

"You seem stressed out. Relax. I promise, we ain't gonna hurt you. You must have a guilty conscience if you think you're in danger."

"Sure, three guys show up after dark and force themselves into my

motel room. Can't be any danger there. Mind if I get dressed?"

"Go right ahead." Eye Patch Man sits down on my bed while I start to put on my clothes. "My name's Reginald. I hate that name. Call me Reggie. And you are...?"

"Evan."

"Nice to meet you, Evan. You must have a pretty good idea of why we're here, right?"

I shrug. If I thought they were cops, I'd cooperate fully, but everything about them screams "bad guys," so I'm going to play stupid for as long as possible.

"The woman you're with, Harriett Lancaster. She's deeply disturbed. She's a danger to herself and those around her. We're here for her protection."

"Are you her doctor?" I ask.

"Nah."

Point for Reggie. If he'd said yes, I'd know he was lying. Whatever he is, this guy is *not* a mental health care professional.

"Are you a cop?"

"Hell no." Another point.

"Bounty hunter?"

Reggie chuckles. "Not quite. Yeah, we're here to collect her, and yeah, we're being paid to do it. But we'll be returning her safely home to her family. I ain't Boba Fett."

"What do you want from me?"

"We wanna know where she is."

Since Harriett is right next-door, this must be a trio of spectacularly crappy bounty hunters. But I'm starting to doubt whether I'm doing the right thing by keeping mum. Whatever their story, it has to be more credible than saving a small town from a Cyclops. If these guys weren't so scary-looking, I would've told them everything, immediately.

Common sense says that I should rat her out before these guys begin the physical violence portion of our night. But common sense and I have been on poor terms recently, and I find it hard to believe that Reggie is truly planning to take her home unharmed.

"She told me that her parents were dead," I say.

"And you believed her?"

"I had no reason to think she was lying."

Reggie grins. The only way it could be a more sinister grin is if he had fangs. "No reason, huh? And what about the Cyclops? You thought that sounded real?"

"What Cyclops?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"No."

"Harriett has this tendency to take pieces of reality—" he taps his eye patch, "—and distort them into her fantasy world. She needs to be returned to her family."

"Where do they live?" I ask.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to take her back. Tell me where her parents live and I'll drive her there. You can have the fee. It's win-win-win. Harriett gets home safe, you get your bounty, and I don't lose sleep from having turned her over to people I don't quite trust."

"You don't trust me?"

"I don't know you."

"And you know her?"

"I know her well enough to not want her to get hurt."

"You look scared, Evan."

"No, I'm fine."

"It's okay," says Reggie. "You can be honest. If we're honest with each other, this will be a lot more pleasant. So let me be honest with you. When I've gotta go searching for the person I'm trying to help, instead of getting that information from somebody who already knows where she is, it makes it more likely that innocent bystanders will get hurt. Sometimes parents bring real young kids to a motel, maybe on their way to visit Grandma and Grandpa, or maybe they're on a road trip to Disney World because the kids are so excited to meet Mickey Mouse in person, and by pure bad luck they were part of my room-by-room search. Little kids don't know that they should just keep their mouths shut. How would they? They're just little kids. That means, though it's nobody's fault, that I have some witnesses I can't trust. And then I have to take care of that problem. It's heartbreaking." He gestures to me. "Well, it's not *nobody's* fault. After all, the person with the information could tell me what I wanna know and save a lot of bloodshed."

I'm sick to my stomach. I've spent my whole adult life working in a cubicle; I'm not equipped to deal with this.

The only plan I can think of right now is to walk across the room, then pound on the wall and shout for Harriett to get out of there. She can handle these guys. She'd be fine. The question is, will I be fine, or will they make sure I don't ever try something like that again?

I'm an unemployed widower, but I've got plenty of reasons to live. I don't want to die. To a lesser extent, I'd also prefer not to end up in the hospital with dozens of broken bones or brain damage. I want to resolve this in a way that doesn't involve me experiencing pain.

They wouldn't stick around to deal with me, would they? They'd immediately go after Harriett before she escaped. I'd have time to run.

Casually, trying not to give away my intention, I wander toward

the other wall.

"I don't get why you're threatening me," I say. "I offered a perfectly good compromise. If you're only in it for the money, why not let me take her home? You can tell her parents what's going on. Get the payment from them before I bring her back. Everybody's happy."

"Why should we trust you?"

"Why not? I'm just trying to be a nice guy."

"Yeah. Driving her all the way to New Orleans. That's pretty darn nice."

Do they know that I drove her all the way from Tampa? Surely they haven't been following us this whole time.

I'm not sure that this is the best time to explain how my life has reached a point where taking this road trip with Harriett seemed like the right thing to do. I decide to make up something more feasible.

"Well, she's pretty hot, right?"

Reggie nods. "Thought you were gonna get some of that?"

"I don't know. I wasn't going to push the issue. She's worth seeing what might happen, though, don't you think?"

"She's hot, but she's mental. Not worth it, my friend. Not worth it. Your best bet is to tell me where she is, get back in your car, and drive home. Consider yourself lucky that you didn't get more involved."

"I don't know about that. I've been with some crazy chicks. It's usually worth it."

"How about you tell us where she is, and we won't tell your wife that you're playing around?"

"My wife is dead."

"Oh, yeah? How long?"

"A couple of years."

"A couple of years, huh? Sure it's not a couple of weeks? We've done our research."

This seems like a really good time for me to pound on the wall.

Until Reggie points a gun at me. Then it suddenly doesn't seem like quite as good of an idea.

The other two guys also take out guns. Had I not gone to the bathroom right before climbing into bed, they'd see exactly how terrified I am.

I have decided that it is not in my best interest to pound on the wall.

"It's gonna take very little effort for us to find her," says Reggie.

"All we're trying to do is keep this as simple as possible. If we have to kill you, that means wrapping you in plastic, sneaking your corpse out to the trunk of our car, chopping you up, and getting rid of the pieces one at a time. It's fun but it's time consuming. And unfortunately we're running out of time, so tell me where the hell she is before I decide

that you're useless to us."

I realize that a tear is running down my cheek. Yep, I'm so scared that I'm crying. And my hands are trembling. But, to my credit, I haven't dropped to my knees and begged for mercy. I'm very, very, *very* tempted to tell them that Harriett is in the next room, but somehow I'm going to force myself to take the risk that they're still willing to talk for a bit longer.

"Call her parents," I say.

"What?"

"Give her parents a quick call. If they're happy to hear from you, I'll tell you where she is."

Since I don't actually believe that these men are here to return Harriett to her parents, it's probably not a good idea to trap them in their lie. I wish I'd considered my words a bit more carefully before I said anything.

Reggie reaches into his pocket and takes out a cell phone. Using just his thumb, since his other hand is currently occupied pointing a gun at me, he taps the screen a couple of times, then raises the phone to his ear.

Nobody says anything for a few moments. I wish I were a kung-fu master. That would be extremely helpful right now.

Finally, Reggie speaks. "Hi, it's me. We've found her. Call me back as soon as you can. It's important." He taps the screen again with his thumb and slides the phone back into his pocket. "If we're lucky, she'll return my call right away. If not, I'm afraid we have a problem."

I'd like to see his phone to verify the call, but with three guns pointed at me, I'm not inclined to make further demands.

Again, Reggie's story makes so much more sense than Harriett's, especially if you consider the Eye Patch Man = Cyclops equation, but I have difficulty trusting the trio of scary-looking men who are threatening my life.

"I'd love to sit around and wait for her to call me back," says Reggie. "But Harriett could be on the move, so it's time for you to tell us what we wanna know, or for us to kill you and start looking ourselves. Which is it?"

"Neither," I say. "I'm not going to just send you after her, but I'll take you to her room. I'm going to be there to make sure you don't hurt her."

"That works," says Reggie. He puts the safety on his gun and reaches behind his back, presumably tucking it into the waist of his pants. The other two do the same.

"I need to pack up my stuff," I say.

Reggie shakes his head. "We'll get it for you." He looks at the chubby-cheeked guy. "Get his stuff."

"There's not much of it," I say. "Let me at least—"

"You're starting to piss me off," says Reggie. "Stop gabbing and take us to her room."

I walk over to the door and open it. What I'd like to see outside is Harriett standing there with her pole. She'll say something witty (I can't think of anything at the moment, but she'll have had time to come up with a good one-liner while she was waiting) and then beat the men senseless.

But, no, there's nobody out there. I walk out of the room and turn right. Harriett's room was to the left.

Here is my plan, in its entirety: I am going to wait for a good opportunity to run, and then run.

This motel has only two floors, so the longest I can stretch this out is to walk down the flight of stairs and then to one end of the building, which will only take a couple of minutes. I assume the motel has security cameras. Even if not, I assume that Reggie and his cronies are cautious about the possibility of them. So they won't just pump me full of bullets where it could be caught on video. In theory.

I walk slowly, followed by Reggie and the guy who's been punched a lot. That's one fewer gun available to shoot me, at least until the chubby-cheeked guy realizes that my belongings consist of very little beyond a phone, wallet, set of keys, and pair of dirty underwear. He probably won't even bring the underwear.

Reggie requests, in a very stern tone of voice, that I walk at a faster pace. I do.

I'm hoping for some sort of distraction. Maybe a nice drug deal happening outside. A couple having a really loud fight with their door ajar. But even though it's not all that late, the motel feels like it's the middle of the night, and it's deathly quiet.

I walk down the stairs. Reggie and the other guy, who I've decided to nickname "Pulp," are right behind me.

I'm not sure where to flee. There'd be somebody in the lobby, but that would be a bad thing if the guys ran after me with guns blazing. Got to find a way to ditch Reggie and Pulp and call the cops without putting innocent lives at risk.

We reach the first floor and I walk past the row of rooms. There are only about ten of them, so I don't have much time. The guys are walking close enough to punch me in the back of the head if they were so inclined.

What the hell am I going to do? If I reach the end and say, "Oops, my mistake, I seem to have led you in the wrong direction," they'll see right through my not-all-that-clever-in-the-first-place ruse.

Fake a heart attack, maybe?

Start screaming and hope that they run?

Tearfully confess and give them Harriett's room number?

I didn't sign up for this. All I wanted to do was tell my boss to go to hell. If I hadn't screwed that up, I wouldn't have gone walking around to clear my head, and now I wouldn't be marching ahead of two gun-carrying assassins/kidnappers/bounty hunters/whatever. That's all it would have taken. "Hey, Dirk, go to hell," and things would be perfectly fine.

What am I going to do?

Unless Harriett drops upon them like a ninja, I've got to figure something out in the next few seconds. And, unfortunately, my best option for not getting shot is to sell her out. It would be a gut-wrenching decision, but I barely know her. Why am I putting my own life at risk? That's madness.

A miracle would be pretty nice right about now.

Any kind of miracle.

Anything.

I'm not picky.

And...I get one.

The second-to-last room in the row. Their curtains are drawn and their door is shut, but the couple inside that room is having the noisiest sex I've ever heard. Not that I've heard much sex; just my college roommate on occasion and my neighbors back when I lived alone in a studio apartment, but this is some seriously high-volume lovemaking. I can hear the slam of the headboard banging against the wall, and though the man is communicating only through guttural moans, the woman is shouting a very specific request, over and over.

I stop. I glance over my shoulder and give the men a *Can you believe this?* look.

Reggie and Pulp stop as well. Even if you're on a professional assignment, it's difficult to ignore the sounds of a couple going at it like wild animals.

I run.

I swerve around the corner. I'm not sure what's behind the motel, but if I'm lucky, I can...shit, nope, I'm not lucky at all. There's a chain-link fence right there.

It's only a little taller than I am. Not an insurmountable obstacle, except that my pursuers are only a second or two behind me, and I lack the ability to leap over fences in a single bound.

Something strikes me in the back, right between the shoulder blades.

I think I've been shot as I fall to the ground.

No, one of them threw his gun at me.

It would have been a really dumb move on their part if I'd been able to retrieve the weapon, but they're upon me in seconds, and Pulp



grabs his gun before I can even try to roll over. They turn me onto my back, then Reggie punches me in the face.

Except for one fight in middle school, I have never been punched in the face. And in middle school, the kid was wearing a mitten. The pain is unbelievable. He punches me again, and then once more, and I have to spit out some blood.

"That wasn't smart," Reggie informs me, pressing the barrel of his gun against my chin.

I'm not sure that an apology will suffice at this point.

"I don't know what kinda weird connection you think you've got with that girl, but it's time to sever it," Reggie tells me. "All you had to do was give us a room number. Now you've gone and made yourself into a loose end."

He punches me in the stomach. I groan and cough, but somehow keep the muffaletta down.

"I don't wanna kill you. That kinda thing weighs on my conscience. But what do I do now? What other option have you left me? Why would you do this to yourself?"

I'm coughing too hard to answer any of those questions, though I assume they were all rhetorical.

"Want me to do it?" asks Pulp.

"Yeah. Cut his throat."

Pulp takes out a large pocketknife and snaps out the blade. I'm not sure if they're trying to conserve bullets for their attack on Harriett, or if they don't want anybody to hear the gunshots, or if they just prefer slitting throats to blowing out people's brains.

I don't think that blabbing Harriett's room number at this point would save my life. Though I'd still try, if I could speak.

Reggie puts his hand over my mouth.

I put up a strong but unsuccessful struggle as Pulp climbs on top of me. I don't want my throat cut. I really, really don't want my throat cut. There is nothing I want less at this particular moment.

"Hurry, before somebody hears," says Reggie.

Pulp presses his blade against my neck but doesn't actually jam it in. He doesn't seem one hundred percent in favor of slashing my throat. Not that I think he's going to kindly spare my life; he just seems a bit squeamish.

"Where's Joel?" he asks.

Reggie looks past me. "How the hell should I know?"

"Shouldn't he be here by now? He only needed to grab a few things."

"Don't get all paranoid. He doesn't know which way we went."

"Yeah, yeah, but—"

"Kill him so we can get back to business."

Pulp begins to slide the knife against my neck, breaking the skin. I'm not yet resigned to my fate, but if I struggle now, I'm only going to make him cut deeper.

I don't believe in the afterlife, so I can't even soothe myself by saying that soon Becky and I will be together again.

Somebody cries out, not too far away.

There's a loud thud, much closer than the cry was.

Pulp stops cutting my neck. "Was that Joel?"

"Sounded like him. Check it out."

Pulp climbs off of me and hurries away to investigate. He goes around the corner, but returns a moment later, eyes wide.

"He's on the ground! He went off the second floor!"

"How do you know?"

"Just *look* at him!"

Reggie apparently decides that my death is less important than seeing what happened to Joel. I expect him to casually fire a bullet into my head, but he doesn't, he just follows Pulp around the corner.

I get to my feet and immediately begin to climb the fence. I'm still feeling the stomach-punch, so I don't climb as well as I normally would, but I scramble to the top pretty quickly.

I climb over the top and then have a dizzy spell. I lose my balance and hit the ground, hard. Not "falling from the second floor of a motel onto pavement" hard, but hard enough to knock the wind out of me and keep me from getting right up and dancing away.

I get up, part of the way, then fall back down. Sharp bolts of pain shoot through my shoulder, and I wonder if I've dislocated it.

I touch my neck. Not as much blood as I expected, though certainly not dry.

As far as I can tell, once I get past a few trees, this will lead to an incline which will then lead me to the highway, where I can try to flag down a car that's doing seventy-five miles an hour.

I assume it's a good thing for me that the other guy went over the second floor railing. It probably wasn't an accident.

Two gunshots ring out.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I stand, all the way this time. I think I messed up my leg, too, which is simply delightful. I inflicted more harm upon myself by falling off the fence than Reggie and Pulp did when they beat me up and cut me.

Anyway, time to suck it up and run for help. Assuming that I'm going in the right direction. Most likely, I'll drown in a swamp or break my neck scaling another fence beside the highway.

I run, though it's more of a zombie-like stagger.

"Evan!"

I stop and turn around. Harriett rushes over to the fence.

"Evan, come back!" She holds up my set of keys. "You can operate your vehicle! Hurry!"

"There are three men trying to find you!" I shout. I doubt this is new information to her by now, but you never know.

"They aren't any more. At least not if you drive us away before they get back up."

I consider sticking with my original plan of just running for the highway, but I turn around and shuffle back to the fence. I can't believe I have to climb this thing again, and this time with only one good arm. I reach up with my right arm and start climbing.

"It's more efficient if you use both hands," says Harriett.

If we weren't in a life-or-death rush, I'd ask if she had bolt cutters in her backpack, which would make this a lot easier. Since we're very much in a hurry, I awkwardly climb to the top, and somehow make it down to the bottom without falling again.

"Did you dislocate your shoulder?" Harriett asks.

"Yeah."

"I can fix that. It will be quick but not without pain." She leans her pole against the fence, then hurriedly unzips her backpack and takes out the towel. "Stuff this into your mouth."

"We can deal with my arm later."

"No. I need you to be able to operate your vehicle accurately."

I stuff the towel into my mouth. Harriett doesn't hesitate; she just grabs my upper arm and jams it back into the socket. Since I recently watched her sew up her own wound without a whimper, I'm

embarrassed to let out a towel-muffled howl of agony, but I do so anyway.

Harriett jiggles my arm. "Fixed?"

I spit out the towel. "Yes, thanks."

Harriett picks up the towel and then takes me by the hand. "Let's go. I don't know how long they'll remain unconscious."

We hurry back around the corner. The chubby-cheeked guy is lying motionless on the pavement, body bent in half the wrong way.

"Oh my God," I say.

"That one won't be getting up as quickly as the others."

"Is he dead?"

"I didn't check."

Reggie and Pulp are in a pile at the bottom of the stairs. Pulp's eyes are closed but he's breathing. Reggie is battered but awake, and trying to drag himself out from underneath his associate.

Several motel room doors are open, though the frisky couple is still going at it, despite the gunshots.

We rush over to my car, which is only about fifty feet away. By the time we get there, Reggie has gotten out from under Pulp. He starts to limp toward us. He must not have his gun anymore, or else presumably he'd be shooting at us.

I unlock Harriett's door first, and scurry over to unlock mine. I get inside and slide the key into the ignition. Reggie is still coming for us, like one of those horror movie killers who moves slowly yet somehow seems even more menacing because of the lack of haste.

His eye patch has slipped down to his cheek. I'd expect an empty socket or a milky film over his eye, but it looks like a perfectly normal eye. At least it does from about twenty feet away at night, which I suppose isn't the best way to judge the appearance of an eye.

Fortunately, the horror movie comparison does not extend to being unable to start the car. The engine roars to life. I put the car in reverse and slam my foot against the gas pedal, just in time to pull away from Reggie. Even up close, his eye looks fine.

I brake inches away from a car parked behind me, spin the steering wheel, and floor the gas again. Reggie leaps onto the back of the car, but we hit a speed bump and he topples off.

We rocket out of the motel parking lot.

"Did you get my phone back?" I ask.

"No. The first man was holding it when I struck him. I'm not certain where it landed."

"Damn it." I'm sure several people have already called the police, but it would be nice to be able to speak with them myself.

"How's your arm?"

"It's sore as hell. I can drive, though."

"Your neck is bleeding."

"I know. They tried to slash my throat."

Harriett gasps. "Oh, Evan, I'm so sorry. Who are they?"

"Don't you know?"

"No."

I'm not sure what the best approach is regarding our attempt to flee from potential pursuers. Get back onto the interstate, or try to find someplace close where we can hide?

I decide to go with the interstate. Put some distance between us. There could be more than the three of them, and somebody could be watching. Yeah, I'm in full-on paranoia mode now.

I turn onto the I-10 West entrance ramp. There is currently no car directly behind us, trying to ram us off the road, so hopefully we're okay for now.

Or maybe it wasn't a good idea to resume traveling in the same direction we'd been going. I don't know. For now, I'm just going to go really fast. I get into the left lane and floor it. If I get pulled over by the police, all the better.

Harriett looks more than a little uncomfortable with our velocity, but she'll have to deal with it.

"Tell me what's going on," I say.

"I don't know."

"You know more than I do."

"I heard your door open. I thought you were going to abandon me, so I got up to try to talk you out of it. I looked through the curtain and saw you with those men. I waited until you'd left to come out. Another man ran out of your room, tried to grab me, and had to be dealt with."

"Well, you sure did that effectively."

"I hope you don't think I should feel sorry for him."

"No, that's not where I was going with this."

"I suppose he could be paralyzed for the rest of his life. I have plenty of emotions, I swear, but it's difficult for me to feel sympathy in this situation."

"I get it," I say. "I'm not trying to get you to weep over the guy who went over the rail. He deserved it. They were all dicks. But this is the point where you need to accept reality."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there's no fucking Cyclops."

Harriett frowns. "It's your vehicle and you get to set the language boundaries, but it's difficult for me to carry on a conversation when there's harsh profanity."

"Don't change the subject."

"That was not a subject change. That was an effort to keep me from being distracted from the subject."

"Fine. Whatever. There's no *flipping* Cyclops."

"Now you're being sarcastic and condescending."

"Well, do you know what kind of conversation deserves that attitude? One about killing a mythological creature. Grow up, Harriett."

"I never asked you to believe me."

"And I don't."

"You've never believed me. Why is it an issue now?"

"Those men showed up and tried to kill me because you're living in a fantasy world! The whole prophecy thing is ridiculous. I mean, c'mon, Jeannie was supposed to be one of your hero buddies, and she had no idea what the hell you were even talking about. I get that your life has been home-schooling taken to an extreme, but it's time to wake up."

"How do I know they were after me? Perhaps you've gotten into some trouble yourself. I only met you yesterday. I don't know who you've enraged."

"They knew about the Cyclops."

Harriett seems genuinely stunned by this. "What are you talking about? What did they say?"

"The one with the eye patch, Reggie, he said that you're delusional. They wanted to take you back to your parents."

Harriett is silent for a moment. "I don't understand his motive. He lied to you. My parents are dead. They killed themselves."

"Why should I believe that?"

"I'm sorry that I didn't have a phone device to take pictures of their corpses before I buried them. Do you want directions to their graves? Do you want to dig them up?"

I sigh with frustration. "You get that between the two stories, I have to believe theirs, right?"

"Why? Men hired by my parents to take me home wouldn't be trying to kill you. Even with my extreme home-schooling I understand that."

"I'm not saying they aren't bad guys."

"Did you give them legitimate cause to want you dead?"

"I wouldn't tell them where you were."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. But even though I have a limited understanding of how the world works, I know that men who are hired to return a daughter to their parents usually don't try to murder people along the way."

"I totally disagree with that. I don't know your parents. They could be crime lords who have dangerous associates working for them. Or you could be on the run because you stole drug money or something."

"Very well," says Harriett. "Both of those are plausible."

"Reggie, the older guy, was wearing an eye patch. *He's* the Cyclops. You projected that onto him or something. I don't know the psychology."

"I've never seen him before."

"I don't buy that."

"I cannot explain why they were looking for me. I assume they want to stop me from fulfilling my destiny. And I'll be honest, it's very worrisome."

"You have to understand my perspective, right?" I ask. "You talk about killing a Cyclops, and then he shows up with an eye patch."

"You keep acting as if I'm trying to convince you that I'm right," Harriett says. "I have yet to make any effort to plead my case. All I've done is ask for a ride. If you want to eject me from your vehicle right now, I accept that. I simply ask that you bring it to a complete stop first."

I glance up at the rear-view mirror. There are several cars behind us, but none of them seem to be operated by drivers suffering from homicidal rage. We may be okay.

"I'm going to drive to the next exit, then pull off and find a phone. I can't force you to stay with me, obviously, but it would make my life easier if you helped me talk to the cops."

Harriett nods. "I owe you that much. I'm sorry about your face, neck, arm, and leg."

\*

A couple of miles later, I take the exit ramp. I watch carefully for a car to follow me, but none does. Maybe all of our problems have been solved and everything will be happy fuzzy delight from now on.

We stop at a convenience store. The pay phone outside doesn't work, of course, but the clerk lets us borrow a phone, and I call the police while Harriett paces around the candy aisle, too distracted to enjoy the bounty of treasures before her.

"We're going to have to answer a lot of questions," I say.

"Yes."

"I'll make you a deal. I won't say anything about the Cyclops if you don't. Tell the truth about everything else, but say that this was a journey to find yourself. Make it sound New Agey."

"New Agey?"

"Just be vague."

"I will. This was a journey to find myself."

And now we're at the police station. We've been here for hours. We've answered, in separate rooms, the same questions about eighty trillion times, though I *think* we're almost done. I sit there silently, while Harriett reads *Lassoing the Cowboy*. I notice that she reaches the last page, then turns immediately to the front and starts reading it again.

My neck is bandaged up, and I've occasionally been holding an ice pack to my face. My leg is bruised up pretty badly but apparently it's nothing that requires a visit to the emergency room, unless I want to go just to be sure, which I don't.

Finally, one of the cops we've been talking to, Detective Jamison Tanson, a young freckle-faced ginger (he's shaved his head bald, but you can tell from his eyebrows), calls us over to his desk.

There is, he's sorry to report, no sign of the culprits. There's an APB based on the descriptions I provided, but I never saw their car, so it's something of a challenge to pull them over at night. Many witnesses were questioned. The motel didn't have security cameras. Well, they *did*, but the feed stopped working a few months ago and the manager was too much of a cheap-ass to get it fixed, according to the front desk clerk.

Nobody got any cell phone pictures of tonight's events, at least not that they're admitting. As Tanson explains, it's not the kind of motel where many of the occupants are there for a night of completely moral and legal rest.

Pulp is gone.

"There are traces of blood," says Tanson. "The lab guys will be working on that, but I wouldn't expect an answer on his identity anytime soon." He looks over at Harriett. "We're also going to try to trace the guns, although of course the serial numbers have been removed. Did you really disarm them?"

Harriett nods.

"That's kind of badass, if you don't mind my saying."

"Thank you."

"You really shouldn't do that, though. Good way to get shot." He takes a drink of coffee. "So that's where we stand. They're gone. We're looking for them. We've got your contact number, and we'll be in touch if any new information comes to light."

They found my phone. The screen is cracked but it still works.

"What about protection?" I ask.



"That's not really our line of business."

"Seriously? These men tried to kill us. They may have followed us all the way from Florida."

"I understand. And if you're staying at a local hotel, we will absolutely drive by and keep an eye on things. But if you're talking about twenty-four-hour protection, you'd need to hire a private service. I can put you in touch with somebody, if that's how you want to proceed."

"No. We won't be staying here."

"Like I said, I'll be in touch."

"Hold on. Harriett, is it okay if I talk to him privately for a minute? It'll be quick, I promise."

She stands up. "Take as long as you want."

After she leaves, I say, "I hate to ask this, but *are* her parents dead? Did her story check out?"

"She didn't say anything about her parents dying."

"She told me they committed suicide."

"If so, there's no record of it," says Tanson. "She has the same address as her parents, Elizabeth and Donald Lancaster, in Bradenton, Florida."

"Is this something you should investigate?"

"It's a bit out of the scope of what we're doing here, Mr. Portin. That would be a matter for the Bradenton authorities or the FBI, not us."

"Seriously? You're not going to check into it?"

"If you're intrigued by the mystery of Harriett Lancaster, have at it. But, no, it's not part of our investigation. We don't have the time or resources for that. "

"The whole thing is just weird."

"Weirdness isn't a crime. She's an odd one, to be sure, but if she wants to go on a journey of self-exploration, that's her right. Do I find it strange that you two are traveling together? Yes, sir, I do. Are you both consenting adults? I have no reason to believe otherwise."

"All right. Well, thanks."

"Not a problem. Like I've said, we've got your contact information."

\*

Harriett and I walk back to my car. "What did you talk to him about?" she asks.

"I asked about your parents."

"What did he say?"

"That there's no record of their death."

Harriett nods. "There wouldn't be."

"You didn't report it?"

"Who would it benefit? They didn't require anything but a proper burial. I didn't require anything but a shovel. We already had the shovel."

"You buried them on your property?"

"Yes."

"I'm pretty sure that's not legal."

"I didn't spend a lot of time mulling over the legality of it."

"Why did they kill themselves?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Let's talk about it."

"They went peacefully. At the same time, while I was asleep. They left a note to say it had to be this way, to mark the beginning of my journey. If they had ever talked about it with me, I wouldn't have allowed them to do it, which I suppose is why they didn't talk about it with me. And I don't wish to discuss it any more." She extends her hand to me. "Anyway, I just want to say that I truly appreciate what you did for me, and I'm sorry that you were put in mortal danger."

"It's okay."

"It's not. You look terrible. I don't mean that in an insulting manner; I mean that your face has an unsightly bruise and the bandage on your neck is also not aesthetically pleasing. I wish it hadn't happened to you."

"Really, it's okay. It doesn't hurt that much." I touch my bruise and wince.

"Are you going to shake my hand? It feels unnatural keeping it extended like this."

"Why are we shaking hands?"

"I assume that we're parting ways now."

That's kind of what I'd assumed, too, so I'm not sure why I suddenly feel like I'm being dumped. "Yeah, we're going our separate ways, but I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to be walking alone so close to where they found us."

"I can defend myself. You've seen ample evidence."

"I know, but being inside a car is an even better defense. Let's get you out of town."

"I accept your offer," says Harriett, opening the door. "And I vow to do whatever I can to protect your life."

"Thank you."

We drive away from the police station and get back on the interstate. We'll go past two more exits, and then I'll drop her off and

begin the long drive home. I'm worried that the guys might be tracking us, but maybe having one of them go *crunch* on the pavement has dissuaded them from pursuing this matter further.

We pass two more exits.

Then another.

And another.

Screw it. I want to know how this all plays out.

I keep on driving.

## CHAPTER NINE

When I'm too exhausted to drive any more, which happens soon after we cross from Louisiana into Texas, we stop at a rest area. We spend about fifteen minutes searching the car for tracking devices, and though neither of us know what a tracking device would look like, we don't find anything that we think might be one. I recline the seat and go to sleep, while Harriett sits next to me and reads her book.

I open my eyes. Daylight. 10:13 a.m.

We have a lovely breakfast of vending machine snacks, and then the drive resumes. Harriett reclines her own seat back and goes to sleep, cradling her pole to her chest.

About half an hour later, she sits up.

"North," she says.

"You want us to drive north?"

She nods vigorously. "Yes."

"How far?"

"I don't know that yet."

We roll down the windows, crank up the music, and drive.

\*

"We're getting further and further from Arizona," I inform her, an hour later.

"I realize that. But it's the correct path to find the second hero."

"But you don't know how far?"

"No."

"So, technically, he or she could be up in Canada."

"Technically."

"Do you have a passport?"

"Yes."

"Really?" Harriett doesn't seem like a passport-carrying kind of lady to me.

"Yes. I'm permitted to cross borders even though I never have."

"Well, I wasn't anticipating a trip out of my own country, so my passport is in my safe at home. Hopefully we'll find your hero before we get to the top of the United States."

\*

"Are you positive we're still going the right way?"

"I was never positive. I was very sure."

"Are you still very sure we're going the right way? We're almost to Oklahoma."

"I'm still very sure."

\*

"So Kansas is coming right up. I'm not trying to suggest that you're leading us astray. I just feel like I should check in at least once per state."

"I still feel that we are following the correct path."

"We could've taken a more efficient route. Your prophecy isn't really helping us maximize our travel time."

"I apologize on the prophecy's behalf."

\*

"Oh, look. 'Welcome To Nebraska.'"

"Have you ever been here?"

"No," I say. "Well, I spent an hour in the Omaha airport once. Doesn't count."

"So you're getting to see more of this beautiful country that you call home." Harriett points out the window. "You've never seen that particular cow before. I'm enriching your life."

I think she's being sarcastic. I'm not one hundred percent certain.

"I'm not saying that your prophecy is a dick, but it should have given you a heads-up about the all-day detour. In the time we've been driving north, we could've been driving west, like we'd planned, and we'd have been in Arizona by tomorrow. Can you imagine if you were on foot? You'd be walking north for weeks not knowing how much

longer you had to go."

"I agree with you. It is not a considerate prophecy."

\*

"South Dakota! My second favorite of the Dakotas!"

I've mostly quit watching for signs of somebody following us. With this bizarre detour, Reggie and his men (*man*, if poor Joel didn't make it) can't possibly be anticipating our destination. I've seen nothing to justify any paranoia that they're behind us. I think we're okay.

Twenty minutes after we cross into South Dakota, Harriett says, "I know where he is."

"Where?"

"Aberdeen."

"Is that in South Dakota?"

"I believe so."

"Well, good. We don't have to worry about me not having a passport, then."

"Definitely Aberdeen. I'm very relieved. I didn't want to say anything, but I was starting to worry that he might be on a different continent."

"You're in charge, so we can do this however you want," I tell her. "But it's my opinion that showing up late at night gives a big extra boost of weirdness to the situation. We should get a hotel and talk to the hero tomorrow."

"No. I don't want to lose him."

"Like I said, you're in charge."

I'd hoped that Aberdeen was right on the Nebraska/South Dakota border, but it's about three-quarters of the way up the state (that's my precise geography training kicking into gear) and we don't arrive until a few minutes after midnight. I'm not going to lie; if we'd seen the "Welcome to Aberdeen" sign right at the stroke of midnight, the timing would have freaked me out a little, but a few minutes after midnight isn't particularly eerie.

Aberdeen's nightlife doesn't quite match that of New Orleans. Downtown is mostly deserted. I assume that nobody would flash me even if I had any beads to throw.

"Here," says Harriett. "Park your vehicle here."

I pull into a spot next to the sidewalk. "It looks like everything's closed."

"It does look that way."

"Sleep?"

"Not yet."

We get out of the car. As always, Harriett takes her backpack and pole with her. She closes her eyes and is silent for a long moment. When she opens them, she says, "Graspin the Colossal."

"We're seriously looking for somebody named Graspin the Colossal?"

"Yes."

"That's not his real name, is it?"

"Doubtful."

"Or is Graspin a girl's name?"

"I believe it's a man. He's close." Harriett begins to walk up the block.

I hurry after her. "Okay, I'm not trying to be the guy who's always trying to ruin everybody's fun, but when I hear 'Graspin the Colossal,' I'm thinking male escort. Maybe this should be a daytime encounter."

"You can wait in the car if you're afraid."

"I'm not afraid. I...all right, never mind. Maybe he's just a stripper."

We walk along the sidewalk, passing an elderly woman who does not look like her nickname is Graspin the Colossal. I'm not sure why I'm even worried about him, since he almost certainly doesn't exist. We're going to have another awkward conversation like the one at the New Orleans gift shop, then resume our journey without a hero, and continue on to Arizona where we will fail to find a Cyclops. Productive road trip.

Harriett picks up her pace. "It's right up ahead."

We arrive at a small shop. Sapphire Comics & Games. A sign on the door reads "Closed," but the shop is lit.

Harriett knocks on the glass door.

We see a slightly overweight guy in his mid-twenties emerge from a room in the back. He walks past a long aisle of comic books and opens the door.

"Hey, sorry, we're closed," he says. He's wearing a *Firefly* t-shirt with traces of orange dust on the front.

"We are looking for Graspin the Colossal," Harriett informs him. The guy grins. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. Are you he?"

"Hell no. I'm the Dungeon Master. Come on in."

We step into the shop. I was a heavy-duty superhero geek as a teenager, but I haven't been in an actual comic shop in thirty years. I pick up a Spider-Man comic. Wow. Not what they used to cost.

"Nice cosplay," the Dungeon Master tells Harriett. "Who are you?"

"Harriett Lancaster."

"Anime?"

"Excuse me?"

"Is Harriett Lancaster an anime character? I'm not familiar with her."

"No, that is my name. This is Evan Portin."

"Ah, gotcha. I'm Mike."

He leads us through the shop to a back room. Three people sit around a card table that's covered with maps, dice, and various other role-playing game accessories, as well as Doritos, pizza, and Red Bull.

Two of the people at the table are attractive girls, which is *not* how it worked in my day. You had to choose between *Dungeons & Dragons* and interacting with females. The world has changed, and it's kind of unfair to those of us who were geeks decades ago.

"Hey, Seth, you've got visitors."

Seth frowns. Like Mike, he's in his mid-twenties, though I'd call him "moderately" instead of "slightly" overweight. His t-shirt says "I Am Groot." He's got thick glasses that are legitimately nerdy, not hipster nerdy, and short brown hair that sticks up all over, probably not intentionally.

"Are you Graspin the Colossal?" Harriett asks.

"Yeah," he says, looking ready to bolt from the room at a moment's notice. "Uh, can I help you?"

The girls, who were staring at us, are now staring at him.

"Can we speak privately?" Harriett asks.

One of the girls, who has pink hair and a wide array of tattoos on her arms, puts her hand protectively on Seth's shoulder. I think she's actually his girlfriend. Again, not fair to those of us from a different generation. "Do you know her?"

Seth shakes his head.

The girl glares at Harriett. "Whatever you've got to say, you can say in front of us."

"Actually, Liz, I'm okay to leave," says the other girl. "I have to use the bathroom anyway."

"It's fine," says Harriett. "We can do this with an audience." She takes the scroll out of her backpack and sets it in front of Seth.

He gasps as if she's placed a brick of solid gold in front of him. He puts a hand over his mouth and takes several deep breaths through his nose. He removes his hand and says, "Yes, we can speak privately."

"That's so not going to happen," says Liz. "What does she want?"

"I really do have to go to the bathroom," says the other girl. She pushes back her chair, stands up, and hurries out of the room.

Seth unrolls the scroll. He sits there, reading silently. His lips tremble. After about fifteen seconds, a tear drops onto the papyrus.

Is he going to hyperventilate? It's starting to look that way. I almost ask if he needs an inhaler, but I don't want to be the kind of



person who would perpetuate that stereotype.

He lets go of the scroll. It rolls back up.

"Seth...?" asks Liz.

"You okay, dude?" asks Mike.

Seth wipes his eyes with his fingertips. "I need a tissue."

"They're in the bathroom, but Margo's in there."

Seth wipes his eyes again and puts on what I assume is supposed to be a brave face, but then breaks down completely and begins to sob.

"What the hell?" Liz asks.

This is unnerving me a bit. Well, more than a bit. A lot. The proper reaction should be confusion, annoyance, and a request that we leave the premises immediately. Graspin the Colossal should not be sobbing right now.

Liz reaches for the scroll, but Harriett snatches it away. "This is not for your eyes."

Liz stands up. "You think I can't take you?"

"Whoa, hold on, stop, whoa, it's okay," I say, taking Harriett by the arm and gently leading her out of range to be able to crack Liz's skull with her pole. I'd very much like to avoid a bloodbath at Sapphire Comics & Games.

Seth is hunched over the table, head in his arms, entire body shaking as he sobs. It's an uncomfortable thing to watch. Liz seems to be focusing less on Seth's well being than on whatever negative feelings she has toward Harriett.

She takes an intimidating step forward. I lead Harriett a step away. Harriett's fist is tight around the pole.

"You know what, I think I should take that," I say, trying unsuccessfully to ease the pole out of her hand. "I'll give it back; I just think we'll all be happier if somebody else is holding on to the pole. Give me the pole, Harriett. Harriett? Let go of the pole. Let go of the pole, please."

"I'm not afraid of her," says Liz.

"That's your own choice," I say. "Harriett? Just open this finger, and then this finger, and then this one..."

Harriett lets me take the pole from her, and I stop feeling as if a cardiac arrest is in my immediate future.

"Let's all just calm down," says Mike. "Seth? Buddy? You okay?"

Seth continues to sob.

"What was on the scroll?" Liz demands.

"His destiny," says Harriett.

"What the hell do you mean, his destiny?"

"Wait, wait," says Mike. "You mean his character's destiny, right? Graspin's destiny? He always took this way too seriously, and I kind of

suspected that he was gaming behind my back, but none of this is real, right?"

Harriett doesn't answer.

Liz takes another step forward.

"Okay, seriously, ma'am, you need to stay away," I tell her. "My friend will beat your ass. You seem like you're in good shape, and I don't know what kind of martial arts training you might have or anything like that, but if you don't stay on your side of this room, I assure you, it ends with an ass-beating. Please don't make her beat your ass."

"Is she the one who gave you that bruise?" Liz asks.

"No. She's the one who beat the asses of the men who gave me this bruise." Should I mention that she flung one of them over a second-floor railing? Nah.

Liz looks as if she has molten lava bubbling under the surface of her face, but she stays on her own side of the room.

"Okay, I can't have fighting in my shop," says Mike. "I think we'll wrap up tonight's session a couple of hours early. Evan, Harriett, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"No!" says Seth, sitting up. His face is red and puffy. "They don't have to leave. I've been waiting for this my whole life. I never told anybody about it. Sometimes I thought I might be insane. But I knew, I just *knew*, that someday you'd show up with the scroll. And now you have. I can't believe it. I just can't believe it."

"What does the scroll say?" Liz asks.

Seth stands up. "It says that we're going to kill a Cyclops."

Nobody says anything for a very long time.

"So how many experience points do you get for that?" Mike asks.

"This isn't a game. I'm not doing this as Graspin the Colossal. I'm doing this as Seth Bryan Lynch. And I am ready."

The other girl walks back into the room. She looks at Seth, then at Liz, then at Harriett, then at me, then at Mike. "I feel like I missed something."

"Seth's been cheating on us with other gaming groups," Mike informs her.

"I said it's not a game! This is for real! I've been preparing for it since I was fifteen! Why do you think Graspin was always going after Cyclopeses?"

"I can't answer that," Mike admits.

Seth turns to Harriett. "When do we leave?"

"First thing in the morning. We'd leave sooner but our driver is sleepy."

I've only now absorbed the idea that Seth is going to be riding with us. It's not like I didn't have advance warning, but I never

imagined that we'd actually find somebody who was on board with the whole Cyclops-slaying thing. I hadn't really mentally prepared for this.

"To be fair, I've been driving all day, and last night some guy tried to slash my throat, so that impacted my rest."

"Hold on," says Liz. She runs a hand through her pink hair and then massages her forehead. "Are you saying that you're leaving with these people?"

"Yes, I am."

"To kill a Cyclops?"

"Yes. I know it's hard to swallow. If they came here and gave you a scroll and you said that it was your destiny to slay a Cyclops, I'd be suspicious, too. But it's the truth."

"We've been together for ten months."

"Yes, I know, I should have told you, but it just sounded so crazy."

"It doesn't *sound* crazy. It *is* crazy. We've been together ten months and I never knew you were mentally ill!"

"I'm not even going to take offense at that, because I totally get where you're coming from. But I am doing this. I'm leaving with them."

Liz just gapes at him.

"Come with us," he says. "Join us on our quest!" He looks over at me. "There's room in your car, right?"

"Uh, I guess."

"Then come with us, Liz."

"I'm not coming with you! I've got work tomorrow. *You've* got work tomorrow. You can't just leave."

"Yes, we can!" He drops to one knee. "Marry me, Liz. Let's do this together."

"No! Stand back up!"

He takes her hand and gazes into her eyes. "Elizabeth Black, will you grant me the honor of being my wife?"

"I already said no! Jesus, you're out of your mind! Do you even know where they're taking you?"

Seth, still on one knee, glances over at Harriett. "Where are you taking me?"

"Arizona," says Harriett.

"Arizona," Seth tells Liz.

"You're just going to drop everything and go to Arizona with a couple of complete strangers? You're going to quit your job for this?"

"I wasn't going to quit. I was going to call in sick."

"There's no such thing as a Cyclops, Seth. This isn't Greek mythology. This is the real world."

"Not to interrupt," says Mike, "but maybe the scroll is talking

about a normal guy with one eye?"

Liz ignores him and yanks her hand out of Seth's. "If you leave, it's over between us."

"For real?"

"Yes. I'm not going to date somebody who's off chasing fairy tales."

Seth looks absolutely devastated. He stands up, dusts off his jeans, and shrugs. "Well, that sucks."

"Yes, it does."

"But I have to do this."

I can't believe it. I'm not trying to obsess over the subject, but if I'd had a girlfriend in my Dungeons & Dragons days, I would have clung to her like a life preserver in the middle of the ocean during a hurricane.

Seth gives Liz a hug. "Make you a deal," he says. "If I text you a picture of the dead Cyclops, do you promise to be waiting for me when I get back?"

"Sure, whatever."

"Thank you."

He hugs Margo, and then Mike, who both look like they're waiting for the moment that he bursts into laughter and reveals that it's an uproariously funny gag.

"Are there any cans of Red Bull left in the fridge?" he asks Mike.

"No."

"Okay. I'll be back, you guys. I promise." He turns to Harriett. "Lead the way."

We walk out of the comic shop and out onto the street. My brain has yet to quite catch up to this turn of events, and I'm bewildered almost beyond the capacity to speak.

"Sorry about all the bawling in there," says Seth. "I don't usually get emotional, but this is a big deal."

"None of us can predict how we will react when confronted with our destiny," says Harriett. "Though when we spin the tale of our grand adventure, I recommend we leave that part out."

## CHAPTER TEN

"So, that's my car," says Seth, pointing to a very small red vehicle parked outside the shop. "Where and when do you want to meet tomorrow?"

"Your home," says Harriett. "Nine a.m."

"Okay. Or maybe we could just meet here? My parents don't really like having new people come over."

"You live with your parents?" I ask, feeling sort of betrayed for having given him the benefit of the doubt on the whole inhaler thing.

"I like to think of it as, my parents live with me," says Seth.

"But they set the rules about having company over?"

"Yes," he admits. "They do. But only because I let them."

"Do you live above ground or below?"

"Hey, who are you to be judging my life? If my mom and dad want me to live with them rent-free, why would I say no? What kind of fiscal responsibility would that be? Am I supposed to pretend I'm too good for them?"

"I'm not judging you," I say. "I'm in the role of 'Guy Who Doesn't Believe There's a Cyclops.' So I'd like to know more about you before I commit to driving you all the way from South Dakota to Arizona."

"You don't believe?"

"No."

"How far did you come to get me?"

"From Florida."

"Jeez."

"And not the most efficient route. Florida to Texas, then Texas to South Dakota."

"Oh, yeah, that's definitely not the fastest way to go. And you two are...together?"

Harriett shakes her head. "We are not romantically linked in any way. He is still in mourning. Evan has very generously donated his time to my cause, even though he remains a skeptic."

"Wow. Sure you weren't kidnapped?" he says, with an uncomfortable laugh.

"I'm sure."

"Hold out your hand," Harriett tells Seth. "Palm up."

Seth holds out his hand. She smacks it with the pole.

He yelps. "Ow! Why'd you do that?"

"I assumed that you'd move your hand before I struck it. It was a reflex test."

"That *hurt*."

"You say you've been preparing for this since you were fifteen?" Harriett asks.

"For ten years. Yeah."

"Then why aren't you more physically fit? How far can you run?"

"Run?"

"Do a push-up for me. Right now."

"Hey, I'm not here to join the army."

"One push-up. I'm not asking you to do fifty, which would be the absolute minimum I'd expect from a true hero. I'm only asking for one."

"I saw some broken glass on the sidewalk," says Seth. "I'm not going to put my hands down there."

"You're part of the prophecy, and this is your destiny," says Harriett. "But I can't help but think that you're not in good enough shape to contribute to the Cyclops-slaying effort."

"I'd be in better shape if you wouldn't smack me like that. I can't hold a sword if you break my hand bones."

"I didn't break any bones."

"You could have."

"No. I'm very conscious of the amount of force I use. This is because I have been preparing for the journey."

"Me too! It's just more mental preparation. The mental part is the most important part."

"Run around the block for us."

"I'm not here to be your running monkey."

"Run around the block. We'll wait."

"You're not my mom."

"Run or we'll leave you behind."

"Fine. You think I can't run a block? I can run a block with my eyes closed." He runs off, although it's more of a slow jog than a run. He reaches the end of the block and turns the corner, leaving our sight.

"He's not what I expected," says Harriett.

"Seems like a nice guy."

"We're off to fight a powerful, menacing Cyclops. He should have lightning-fast reflexes. He shouldn't be flabby all over. I should be able to detect muscle content in his arms."

"I guess his parents didn't deny him chocolate."

"I don't know what to do."

"It's not like Jeannie from the gift shop gave off a warrior vibe. You'll have to trust the scroll, I suppose."

"I suppose." Harriett sighs. "Did his reaction do anything to convince you of the validity of the prophecy?"

"Honestly, right now I'm baffled beyond the ability to even try to comprehend what's happening. I'm just going with the flow."

I've spent enough time with Harriett to believe that she is entirely convinced of the truth of the prophecy. Seth embracing this truth is freaking me out, but I'm still not ready to go in a "mythical beasts are real" direction. There's some sort of reasonable explanation. Hypnosis, probably. Harriett *thinks* that she's being guided by some internal navigation, but actually she's responding to information that's been implanted into her subconscious.

Shit, that could be it! Harriett and Seth have both had their subconscious minds screwed with by a hypnotist. Is it some kind of experiment? Will we be greeted in Arizona by a mad scientist who's pointing and laughing?

"How long do you think it will take him to circle the block?" Harriett asks.

"A while."

"Despite her lack of youth, I'd wager that Jeannie would be wheezing less than Seth will be upon his return."

"Maybe we'll get him a Thighmaster to use in the back seat."

"What is a—"

"It doesn't matter."

"Perhaps he'll surprise us with his valor."

"Are you sure we can trust him?" I ask. "How do we know he's not an axe-murderer?"

"I hope he is. Axe-murdering would be a useful skill."

"Seriously, though."

"I was being serious."

"I get that the whole point of driving so far out of our way was so this guy we'd never met before would join us. So it's ironic when I say, hey, this guy's never met us before, there must be something wrong with him if he's willing to join us. What if he's dangerous?"

"He's not. That's why I'm concerned."

"He doesn't have to be Conan to be dangerous."

"If it would make you feel better, I suppose we could keep him in chains."

"Was that humor?" I ask.

"No," says Harriett. "Should it have been?"

"All I'm saying is that sometimes strangers you let into your car leave you dead by the side of the road. That's all I'm saying."

"So let's return to your comment about irony. It is indeed ironic

that you're reluctant to join forces with the hero. I would never have expected that."

"I never expected him to acknowledge the Cyclops!"

"Yet he did. To me, it would seem odd to drive all this way and then leave him behind, especially when he's so unthreatening."

"You're right, you're right," I say. "I just want to make one hundred percent sure you're okay with the idea."

"I am."

"And that you'll whack him in the face with your pole if it looks like he's going to try to strangle me."

"I will."

"Cool."

"He does have a vehicle of his own. Perhaps this is where you were meant to leave me."

"That car isn't going to make it to Arizona. He'll be lucky to make it home."

Harriett smiles. "I think you're simply not ready to part ways. You want to see where my path leads."

"Yes. Yes, I do. I will freely admit that. I've got too much of an investment in this now to just let it drop. When I watch a movie, or read a book, or even listen to a song, I need to get to the end."

"You don't have any pets at home that are going unfed, do you?"

"No. I'm allergic to dogs and Becky was allergic to cats. Neither of us wanted fish."

Harriett glances at her watch. "I wish he was back."

"I hope Reggie wasn't waiting around the corner for him."

I didn't say that as a legitimate concern, but Harriett frowns, and suddenly it sounds much less ridiculous than it should.

"I'll be back," Harriett says. She runs off.

Now I'm unprotected. I'm not worried, because it's absurd that Reggie, Pulp, and the crushed remains of Joel actually followed us here, but I'm also not whistling a merry tune. I'll just stand here, a bit nervous, and wait for the inevitable moment when Harriett returns with a winded Seth.

A couple of minutes later, Harriett comes around the opposite corner. Seth is behind her, extremely winded.

I hurry over to them, weirdly relieved.

"This is a bunch of crap," says Seth, gasping for breath after every other word. "I should be saving my energy for the Cyclops."

"Nine a.m." Harriett tells him. "Right here."



We get adjoining first-floor rooms at a decent hotel. I don't feel completely safe, but the door is locked, and I figure that if somebody knocks, I'll peek through the peephole, and if they're scary-looking men, I simply won't answer the door.

I take a shower (a wonderful, wonderful hot shower), put on a robe that I don't even care may not have been washed since the last occupant, and plop onto the bed. I consider watching some television, decide that I'm too tired, and fall asleep.

\*

The alarm goes off at 8:15. I roll over, shut it off, and realize that I've been crying.

I didn't even know you could cry in your sleep. I've cried myself *to* sleep a few times since Becky's death, but not while unconscious. Maybe I was half-awake. Either way, it's the first time I've cried since leaving on this crazy journey.

No, wait, there was that one tear that trickled down my face when I thought Reggie was going to murder me. But I'm only counting sorrow-based tears.

I get up, walk into the bathroom, and look in the mirror. My bruise, though still there, has faded quite a bit. It's no longer my dominant facial feature.

I take another long, wonderful shower, get dressed, and knock on Harriett's door at exactly 8:45. She is, of course, ready to go. She's still wearing the same black dress. The hotel has a laundry service, but I assume she washed it in the sink and hung it up to dry.

We grab some bagels from the complimentary continental breakfast then drive back to Sapphire Comics & Games. Seth is waiting for us, holding an enormous red duffel bag. I get out of the car, open the trunk, and take the bag from him, grunting at its weight.

"What's in here?"

"Clothes and weapons."

"Explosives?"

"Nah."

"Everything's legal?"

"Yeah."

"If we get pulled over by the police, and they search your bag, are we going to have problems?"

Seth shrugs. "Nah. I mean, they'll be suspicious, sure, but it's all fine as long as we're not crossing any borders."

I close the trunk. "All right."

He gets into the back seat as I return to my spot behind the wheel. At least now we can share some of the driving.

"Hey, Harriett. How'd you sleep?" he asks.

"Very well. And you?"

"Eh. Over breakfast I told my mom and dad that you were taking me to Arizona on a location scout—I'm an aspiring filmmaker. Not that I've made any movies or taken classes or practiced, but I see a lot of movies where I know I could do better than that. Anyway, my mom and dad thought that was pretty cool, and they asked if I'd arranged for the time off work, and I said I'd take care of that on the road, and they didn't think that was so cool, so they got kind of upset. Then Liz called them and told them the Cyclops part, which I guess I shouldn't have said out loud in front of her last night, and it kind of all went downhill from there. There was talk about therapists, which you may have had to deal with yourselves, but in the end we kind of worked it out. Well, we didn't work it out exactly. My mom grabbed my leg, and I had to shake her off, and the whole thing was kind of hellish, but, ultimately, I'm here."

"I agree that you probably shouldn't have said the Cyclops part out loud," I say, starting the car and pulling away from Sapphire Comics & Games.

"I know. I just got so excited and emotional. I can't believe this is actually happening. It's like having an imaginary friend, and you know you shouldn't keep believing in him, yet somehow you know that he exists." Seth clears his throat. "I don't have an imaginary friend, by the way. I was using that as a comparison."

"So, as the glass-is-half-empty guy," I say, "do you have a Plan B for if we get to Arizona and there's no Cyclops, and you come back to South Dakota without a job or girlfriend?"

"Nope. I sure don't."

"Just checking."

"I should clarify that my job is a waiter. It's not like I'm walking away from a career as a neurosurgeon. The manager will be pretty pissed, but I'll find another job. It's hard to get blackballed from the food service industry. What do you do?"

"I'm an accountant."

"Oooh, sexy."

"Was an accountant. No, I guess I'm still an accountant; I'm just not employed as one right now."

"Laid off?"

"I quit."

"Angry quit or lotto-win quit?"

"Angry quit."

"Yeah? I bet it was *sweet* when you told your boss."

"It was a lot less sweet than it should have been."

"That sucks." Seth pats the back of Harriett's seat. "So what do you do?"

"I train to slay a Cyclops."

"Does that pay well?"

"I, too, lived with my parents. They did not require me to get a traditional job, but I did a great deal of plowing, gardening, food preparation, fence-building, and various other forms of manual labor."

"That's awesome," says Seth. "See, I'd be in much better shape if I could've worked out that kind of deal."

"It really was not awesome. I never traveled. Rarely interacted. As I've discovered, my social skills are less than spectacular. I've missed out on a lot. Did you know they combine peanut butter with chocolate?"

"I did. Good stuff, good stuff."

"I have a query for you. How do you 'see' the Cyclops? What mental image do you have of it?"

Seth considers that for a moment. "I guess I don't have a specific image. It's kind of abstract and stylized. It's got the one eye, of course, and huge sharp teeth, but beyond that I can't really *picture* it, if you know what I mean."

"Huge sharp teeth?" asks Harriett.

"Yeah."

"I've pictured it many times, but none of those images involved huge sharp teeth."

"Oh, yeah, it's got big teeth for sure. We'll definitely need to psyche ourselves up for that. How tall were you thinking? I was thinking maybe ten, fifteen feet."

"That sounds accurate. I'd err more on the side of fifteen."

"You think this Cyclops is going to be fifteen feet tall?" I ask them both.

"Approximately," says Harriett.

I glance at Seth in the rear-view mirror. "And you're not terrified?"

"Not now. It's all the way in Arizona."

"I expect to experience some fear," says Harriett. "I'm prepared to overcome it."

Seth nods his agreement. "I figure, the closer we get, the more scared I'll be. But it's my destiny. I've got to suck it up. For all I know, this car is driving me to my death. And if that's the case, well, I'm sure I'll start to flip out once we get to Colorado or so. For now, hey, road trip to destiny. Better than what I was doing before."

"I'm glad I'm a non-believer," I say, "because if I thought we were truly heading toward a fifteen-foot-tall fanged Cyclops, I'd be crapping myself."

Seth chuckles. "You're outvoted on the Cyclops existence, two to one, so I hope you brought extra pants."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Seth talks a lot more than Harriett does. He also, apparently, has a bladder the size of a pinto bean. Never have I encountered somebody who requires more frequent pee breaks. And I worked with a guy named Don who drank twelve to fourteen cups of coffee a day, at least until he had a nervous breakdown and went on long-term disability.

He doesn't talk much about himself or his family. Mostly, he talks about role-playing games, video games, and movies, which he feels have become too much like video games. He'd tried to talk to Harriett about her life, but he couldn't get her to share any more than I could, even though their destinies are apparently entwined. Then he'd tried to talk to me about my life, which resulted in some tears that made everybody uncomfortable. So games and movies it is.

"Can we stop at the next exit?" Seth asks. "I have to pee."

Harriett turns around and looks back at him. "Again?"

"Yeah. It's kind of an emergency."

Harriett sighs. "One doesn't hear about the great heroes of history urinating this frequently."

"Hey," says Seth, "I'm sorry that I haven't trained my entire life to control my need to pee. If there was a bladder enlargement procedure, I'd have it done. Maybe I could do gastric bypass at the same time; have them take some of my stomach and sew it onto my bladder."

"There would be a recovery period after the surgery, so that idea is impractical right now."

"This is getting a little too gross for me," I say. "We should stop for lunch anyway."

"That's a great idea," says Seth. "Is food choice a democracy or dictatorship?"

"We can vote," I say.

"I vote Mexican."

"That's fine with me," I say. "Harriett?"

"I trust Seth's food selection."

At the next exit, we stop at Taco Bell. Harriett seems a bit overwhelmed by the selection, so she tells the woman at the counter that she wants the same thing I ordered.

We sit down with our tray of tacos. Seth tears open a packet of hot

sauce and pours it on, while Harriett unwraps her hard-shell taco and holds it up.

"So the shell holds in the meat and other ingredients. That's a very clever design."

"You've never had a taco before?" Seth asks.

"No."

"Never?"

"Never. I've had the individual components, but not an actual taco."

"Wow. I wish I were you, having a bite of a taco for the first time. Do you want some hot sauce?"

"Let's start her off slow," I say.

Harriett takes a bite. The shell cracks and half of the taco spills onto the tray.

"Yeah, they'll do that," Seth says.

Harriett chews and swallows. "I expected greater structural integrity, but I do like tacos."

Seth takes a huge bite of his. "What else haven't you tried?" he asks, still chewing.

"I'm not sure what's available."

"Have you had a burrito?"

"No."

"It's the same stuff that's in a taco, just more of it, and wrapped in a soft tortilla. They're amazing. Have you ever had fried chicken?"

"I have eaten chicken on a regular basis. We didn't deep-fry anything."

"No disrespect to your family, but that's criminal. They should literally be charged with a crime against food. The deep-frying is the best part. If you can deep-fry something, and then put it on a stick, you've achieved culinary perfection."

"You eat fried chicken on a stick?"

"No, chicken comes with its own stick. Almost anything else, though. You can deep-fry butter and put it on a stick. You never had fried fish?"

"No. Our fish was broiled in the oven or grilled."

"That's messed up. The only way fish is edible is in fish-stick form. That's how you get rid of the fish flavor. What about Tapas?"

"What's Tapas?"

"It's when they bring food in really small portions. It's stupid. It's for rich people. Don't ever have it. What about steak?"

"I have consumed an enormous amount of steak in my life."

"Popcorn?" Seth asks.

"Yes."

"With butter?"

"A reasonable amount."

"Ummmmm, potato skins?"

"Of course. That's the most nutritious part. Throwing it away would be wasteful."

"No, I mean when it's just the skin—well, I guess there's some potato interior in there, too, but mostly it's just the skin, covered with cheese, onions, sour cream, bacon, and jalapenos. The bacon is the best part. The pre-packaged skins have bacon bits, but I like to enhance it with bacon strips. It's so good. So good. I'm sitting here stuffing my face with a delicious taco and I'm longing for potato skins. That's how good they are."

"Do they sell them here?"

Seth snorts. "I wish. What about pizza?"

"Yes, I've had pizza."

"With stuffed crust?"

"Stuffed with what?"

"More cheese, usually."

"No. My pizza crust is primarily a handle."

"What a waste."

"Let me ask a question," says Harriett. "Have you ever had venison?"

"Yeah."

"That you killed, dressed, and prepared yourself?"

"Not all three of those."

"So you killed a deer?"

"No, but Graspin the Colossal did."

"We won't count him. Have you ever dressed one?"

"You mean skinning it, cleaning out the guts, and cutting it up, right?"

"Right."

"Hell no."

"Have you prepared venison?"

"Do you mean prepared from scratch, or reheated later?"

"Were you involved in any part of its original preparation for the meal?"

"This would have been a long time ago. I probably set the table. I just remember that it was kind of gamey. And I started thinking of Bambi. Which made me think of Bambi's mom. It was kind of a bummer of a dinner."

"Have you ever had puma?" Harriett asks.

"No," says Seth. "Holy shit, have you?"

"No. I would though, given the opportunity, and if it were a fair hunt."

"Maybe we'll get attacked by pumas on the way to kill the

Cyclops."

"Have either of you had Cyclops?" I ask. "The eyeball is a delicacy. Sprinkle some garlic salt on it, throw it on the grill...mmmmm. You've got to cut off the stalk, though, because it gets tough and the flavor profile just isn't there."

Harriett and Seth both give me blank stares.

"C'mon, you two get to talk about puma attacks, but *I'm* the one who's being silly?"

"There's nothing silly about pumas," Seth informs me. "Those things will shred you. In the event of a puma attack, you'd be well advised to focus more on defending yourself and less on making jokes about eating Cyclops eyeballs."

"Shut up and eat your tacos."

"Yes, sir."

With Harriett no longer a taco-virgin (Seth's term, most assuredly not mine) we return to the car and to the highway. I'm not going to lie—I'm definitely feeling road trip fatigue. It was a long-ass trip without the detour, and there's no guarantee that our next "hero" won't require another significant detour.

But I'm here voluntarily. I can drop them off whenever I want, no hard feelings. Well, Seth might have hard feelings. Either way, if I really start to get sick of being in this car, I can always insist on taking a break for a day or two. Denver is halfway between Aberdeen and Phoenix (not that I know that we're going to Phoenix) and it might be a good place to hang out for a while.

\*

"I have to pee," says Seth.

\*

"Can we stop? I've got to pee," says Seth.

\*

"Anybody else up for a pee break?" asks Seth.



\*

"Hey, it's not an emergency, but—okay, now it is. Could you pull over?"

"Can't you wait until the next exit?" I ask.

"Not with one hundred percent certainty."

I pull over on the side of the road.

\*

"Does anybody have an empty can or bottle they aren't using? Actually, it doesn't have to be completely empty."

"No! I'll pull over."

\*

"I know you're going to kill me, but—"

"Yes, I'll pull over so you can pee."

"That's not what I was going to say. But you've planted the idea into my head so now I *do* have to go."

"That's fine. So why was I going to kill you?"

"Never mind."

\*

"I have to pee," says Seth.

\*

And then we're in Denver.

Even with the frequent breaks, we've made good time. If it weren't

April, I'd recommend that we head to the nearest ski lodge. Instead, I recommend that we have some dinner and then get a full night's sleep.

Since I'm the oldest of the trio, I'm prepared for the reaction to be, "G'night, Grampa!" But Harriett and Seth agree that this is an excellent idea.

"We've had a long day," says Seth. "Tomorrow will be another long day, and we should get some rest so that we can travel as far as possible and maybe get there tomorrow night."

Personally, if I believed that there was a ferocious Cyclops waiting for us in Arizona, I'd want to stretch out the journey as much as possible, so I guess I have to respect their courage.

We drive around looking for the perfect place to eat. Seth suggests a Buffalo wings place, but Harriett vetoes the idea.

"There!" she says, pointing out the window as we drive past a small tavern.

"That place?" I ask, genuinely surprised.

"Yes. I want to play billiards. I never have and I think I'll be good at it."

"Looks like kind of a dive," says Seth, as I do a U-turn.

"If we get into a barroom brawl, you can prove your valor," says Harriett.

"Then I'm going to bring in one of my swords."

"No," I say. "You are not going to bring in one of your swords."

"I'll be discreet about it."

"We're not storming the castle of an evil warlord. We're going into a perfectly respectable tavern on a well-lit street. There's not going to be any trouble. If there is, we will calmly leave. Everybody understand?"

"You're the boss," says Seth.

"No, I'm the driver. Which gives me the leverage to say that we're not stopping here unless everybody leaves their weapons. So, yes, in this case I am the boss. Thank you for acknowledging that."

"Anytime, dude."

"Harriett, you're leaving your stick."

"That's acceptable," she says. "I will be constantly aware of the location of the billiards cues."

I pull into the parking lot, which is loose gravel. The nearest car in the lot is parked so badly that this can't possibly be the first stop on the owner's alcohol adventure for the evening, so I pass it and park at the end of the row of about six cars.

We go inside. The first thing that hits me is that this is most definitely *not* a non-smoking establishment. Becky would have immediately turned around and marched us right back out, but Harriett doesn't seem to mind. Seth lets out a soft cough just to let us

know that his lungs are inconvenienced. Since a sign invites us to seat ourselves, we sit down at an empty booth near the pool table.

Our server approaches immediately. She's a pretty young blonde whose breasts strain so tightly against her blouse that I'm certain that at some point a button is going to pop off with the velocity of a bullet and kill somebody. I order a Sprite because it's caffeine-free, and Seth orders a Mountain Dew.

"I've only ever had wine," Harriett tells the server. "What other variety of alcoholic beverage do you recommend?"

"Oh, honey, you need to do some shots," says the server, winking at me.

"No, I don't want to dance suggestively. I just want to try something different."

"How about a margarita?"

"That sounds delightful. Thank you."

"Frozen or on the rocks?"

"She doesn't mean literal rocks," says Seth. "It's ice cubes."

"I know that."

"Just making sure. I didn't know that until a couple of years ago." I can't tell if Seth is being sincere or not. I decide that he isn't. Harriett orders her margarita frozen.

Though there are about ten food items on the menu, the server politely but firmly dissuades us from ordering anything but the burgers. And within that category, she suggests that the guacamole burger isn't the finest choice, at least not this late at night. The three of us order cheeseburgers.

There's only one pool table, and two guys are in the middle of a game. They're in their twenties, good-looking, and though they aren't wearing cowboy hats they're otherwise dressed as if they enjoy some line dancing from time to time.

Harriett slides out of the booth. "I'm going to observe," she tells me.

I feel oddly protective, even though I'm ten feet away and, if her personal safety *does* become an issue, I probably won't be able to do anything but watch the bodies drop.

She walks over, smiles at the guys, and tells them that she wants to watch them play billiards. The guys do not seem displeased by her presence.

I keep them in my peripheral vision as I turn most of my attention to Seth. "So, do you really believe that this is your destiny?"

"Yeah. I do as of last night. If you'd asked me before that, I would've said no. I figured it had to be something somebody told me when I was really young, where I only remembered the story and not who told it to me. But then Harriett showed up with a scroll that said

exactly what I've believed in my heart all this time, and as soon as I saw it I was like, it's all true."

"So there's no part of you that's saying, hey, a giant Cyclops terrorizing a small town is probably bullshit?"

"Look, I *want* to believe. I'm not going to try to deny that. And I could be like one of those Bigfoot hunters who want to find Bigfoot so bad that they think their blurry picture of a tree stump is Bigfoot crouching down picking something out of his toenail. That might be me. I admit it. But Harriett believes, I believe...so why shouldn't I go?"

"I'm not trying to talk you out of it. I just want to make sure that you are truly sincere. I don't want to find out that you were thinking, 'Hey, I'll pretend I believe the deranged lady, and that'll give me a reason to get out of a bad relationship.'"

Seth laughs. "I promise you, I wasn't trying to get away from Liz. She's awesome. We get along great. The sex is rare but it's awesome. If she'd accepted my marriage proposal, I would've asked you to take us straight to Vegas after we kill the Cyclops."

"It wasn't that good of a proposal."

"I've seen worse."

"Where?"

"At baseball games on Jumbotron."

"You go to baseball games?"

"My ex-wife was into sports."

"You have an ex-wife?"

"Yeah. We weren't all that compatible. It was one of those deals where we were at the same party that neither one of us wanted to be at, and we hooked up based on mutually not wanting to be there. She got pregnant, and I thought the honorable thing to do would be to marry her. It kind of worked out, I guess, but then she met somebody else. Good guy. Irish. Says he didn't sleep with her until our divorce was final. He probably did—I mean, he's a handsome guy, and he could've talked her into anything with that accent—but it was nice of him to say that he didn't. You've got to figure there was at least some oral, but that's not really relevant to the story."

"Nope. Sure isn't."

"That's basically it. My daughter and ex-wife are living in Belfast. She's three. Her name's Kaylee. My ex-wife still doesn't know she was named after a *Firefly* character. Want to see a picture?"

"Yeah."

Seth takes out his cell phone, swipes the screen a couple of times, and shows me a picture of a brown-haired little girl in a white dress. She's chewing on the trunk of a stuffed elephant.

"She's adorable."

Seth nods and puts his cell phone away. "I could have stopped

them from going. My mom and dad hired a lawyer and everything. It kills me to only see Kaylee on Skype, but why make somebody miserable? Why keep my ex where she didn't want to be? If I thought for one second that the Irish son of a bitch wasn't being a great father, I'd be on the next flight over there to take her back. I mean, not really. Life on the run is no way to raise a kid, or, worse, I'd be in Irish prison, but I'd take the appropriate legal measures to get her back. It's not an issue, though, because he's a great dad. A really great dad."

"We've spent all day in a car together. Why am I just now learning this?"

"Because I think it makes me sound like a douchebag."

The server arrives with our drinks. Harriett is laughing with the guys playing pool, so the server hand-delivers it to her. Harriett thanks her, takes a sip, nods approvingly, and continues laughing.

"I hope we don't have to kick their asses," Seth says.

"She can take care of herself. And she's right there, so lower your voice."

The shorter of the two guys takes out his cell phone, looks at it, and then apologizes to his friend and Harriett and says that he has to leave. He hands his pool cue to Harriett and walks away. He's a good wingman, leaving his buddy alone with the hot redhead.

"I'm starving," says Seth. "If she breaks that pool stick over his head, I hope she waits until after we've eaten."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Our burgers are taking forever. Cognitively, we know that we could not whack a cow with a sledge hammer, slice off a piece, grind it up, season it, shape it into a burger patty, and throw it on the grill in less time, but it doesn't stop Seth and I from feeling that way.

Harriett's new friend is happily teaching her the rules of pool. This involves a lot of showing her how to properly hold the cue stick, which also involves a lot of leaning over the table. I never realized just how pervy the game of billiards can be. He whispers a lot of things to Harriett that make her laugh.

Finally, our burgers arrive. They look pretty damn good, and the fries are so hot that you can practically see the grease still sizzling on them, so the meal was worth the wait.

Harriett slides back into the booth next to me. "That was enjoyable," she says. "He was a fine instructor."

"Did he say that you're a natural?" I ask.

"I *am* a natural."

The guy racks up the balls again. Apparently he's going to play a solo game while we eat.

"You realize that he just wanted to look at your butt, right?" asks Seth.

Harriett frowns. "He did not."

"He was leering and rubbing up against you. I hate to be the one to break this to you, but we men are disgusting animals." Seth takes a big bite of his burger. "We're awful. Just awful."

"I disagree," says Harriett. "Mitchell was very instructive. He knew all of the rules of the game, and provided helpful strategies for success."

"While looking at your butt."

"I found him to be witty, charming, and respectful. If he caught the occasional glimpse of my posterior, I have no objections. Do you think I wasn't looking at *his* posterior when he bent over the table? Of course I was. Look at those pants he's wearing. I wanted him to lean over the table even more frequently, but I didn't want to arouse his suspicion."

Seth takes another bite of his burger. "All right, then."

Harriett is the first one finished with her meal. Mitchell is still playing his solo game, and Harriett excuses herself to get up and rejoin him.

I wonder if it's reflective of me that I don't think Mitchell can possibly be interested only in a friendly game of billiards. He looks nice enough. There's no real *I'm gonna konk you on the head with my wooden club and drag you back to my cave* vibe. I just can't help feeling like the father of a teenage girl whose date looks as if he might contain active hormones.

It'll be fine. I need to stop worrying.

Seth finishes the last of his fries. "Maybe we should join them."

"We weren't invited. How about we play some darts?"

"Sure."

We get up and walk over to the electronic darts game. Harriett is too focused on billiards to notice.

"Do you want to make this more interesting?" asks Seth.

"How much?"

"Ten bucks?"

"Do you have ten?"

Seth removes a ten-dollar bill from his wallet.

"All right," I say. "Let's do this."

As it turns out, Seth is an astoundingly talented darts player. If we run out of money, we can fund this trip by having him pretend to suck for a couple of rounds until we raise the wager. I've only played darts a few times in my life, and I made no claims to have any skill at it, but it's still an embarrassing, devastating defeat.

"Did you bring real darts to throw at the Cyclops?" I ask.

"Actually, I did."

It's almost ten-thirty now. I hate to interrupt Harriett's fun so that we can go to bed, but this is her quest, after all, and she's not the one who has to drive.

I walk over to the pool table.

"Hey, how's it going?" asks Mitchell, holding out his hand. "You Harriett's father?"

I bristle. I suppose the math does work out if I were a teenage father, and I've aged badly since Becky got sick, but still...

"Nope," I say, shaking his hand. He's got one of those needlessly strong grips. I'm not suggesting that I want to yelp in pain or anything; I just don't understand why some people need to make the process uncomfortable. "Just a friend."

"You want to join us when we're done with this game? Bring over your other friend? Two against two?"

"Nah, thanks. Harriett, I think it's probably time to head off."

Harriett looks extremely disappointed, and I immediately feel bad,

like a grumpy old codger ruining everybody's fun.

"Okay, maybe one game."

"No, you're right," says Harriett. "It's best to leave so we can get an early start in the morning. I'm going with Mitchell out to his truck for a few minutes, and then I shall return and we can depart."

"Oh," I say.

She takes Mitchell's hand. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wait, are you sure that's a good idea?" I ask.

"I do. Five minutes. There's still a bill to settle, and Seth will need to use the restroom, so we wouldn't be leaving sooner than that anyway."

"Yeah, that's, uh, true..."

"You still have sufficient cash from the last amount I provided, right?"

"Yeah, that's not it, I just, uh..."

"Then I shall return."

She leads Mitchell out of the tavern. Seth walks over to me. "Did she just do what I think she just did?"

"Yes."

"Well, good for her. She sees what she wants and she goes for it. I think we can all learn from her example."

"This can't end well."

"Not for her. Not in five minutes."

"Are you ready for your check?" asks the waitress.

"Yes, thanks. Actually, to save time, let me just give you my card." I hand her my credit card and she leaves.

"You look distressed," says Seth.

"Well, yeah."

"She's a big girl."

"She's naïve."

"I told her that men are disgusting animals. She's got the necessary information."

"This feels wrong."

"He knows we're with her. He knows we could describe him to the cops. It'll be fine. It's nice to know that one of us is getting some action."

We stand around for another minute until the waitress brings me back my card and the receipt. I add a generous tip for warning us away from the guacamole.

"I'm going to check on her," I say.

"Yeah, voyeur that shit."

"Wait here."

I walk toward the door. On one hand, what Harriett does with



Mitchell in his truck is none of my business. On the other hand, a couple of nights ago people were trying to kill us. How do I know Mitchell isn't working for them? I mean, besides the fact that this plan would require them to somehow know that we'd choose this specific tavern for dinner, and that Harriett would approach the guys playing pool. Okay, Mitchell isn't working for them. That doesn't mean this isn't a bad idea.

I walk outside. There are several trucks in the parking lot, but I quickly identify Mitchell's green Ford, because that's the one where he and Harriett are passionately kissing.

I decide that unless I am prepared to go over there, throw open the door, and drag her out while shouting, "No! No! No! Bad!" I should go back inside.

I go back inside.

"What're they doing?" Seth asks.

"Making out."

"Is his hand on her boob?"

"No."

"What's the plan?"

"We wait for her to come back."

"Should we play another game of darts?"

"No."

We stand around for a moment, until I decide that when Harriett returns it'll look better if we aren't just standing around. We return to the booth.

A minute later, which I note is exactly five minutes after Harriett went outside, the door swings open and she walks back into the tavern. She's smiling and beaming. Seth and I get up, and the three of us leave the building.

Mitchell honks and gives a friendly wave as he drives off.

We walk to my car. Harriett bounces a couple of times, and looks as if she's having to restrain herself from skipping all the way to the vehicle.

I unlock the door for her. "Enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, very much so, thanks for asking," she says. She opens the door, does another little bounce, and gets inside.

Seth grins at me as he climbs into the back.

I get inside and put on my seat belt.

"I know that a lady does not kiss and tell," says Harriett, "but I have to kiss and tell. I kissed him!"

"We're all very proud of you," Seth says.

"He was a perfect gentleman. I'd explained that I very much wanted to kiss him, and that since there was not time for a proper courtship I was willing to expedite the process." She traces her index

finger over her lower lip. "He had wonderful lips. Just like I've always imagined."

"Did he slip you the tongue?" Seth asks.

"Absolutely not. That would have been improper."

"So that was your first kiss?" I ask.

Harriett nods, positively giddy. "My first real kiss, yes. I never expected such a thing to be part of this journey, but I saw him there, and he looked like a prince, and I couldn't help myself. I'm only human." She hugs herself. "I may have to relocate to Denver after the Cyclops is slain."

"Okay, well, the burgers were juicy, the fries were crispy, and Harriett had her first kiss," I say. "I'd call that tavern visit a win."

"I also had my first margarita," Harriett says.

"That, too."

"I took too large of a sip and got that brief headache."

"Brain freeze," Seth says.

"Is that what that phenomena is called?"

"Yeah. It's not a medical term, though. I assume there's an actual word for it. I don't know what it is. I should Google it."

"I believe I'll try my next one on the rocks instead of frozen," says Harriett. "That way I won't have to worry about my speed of consumption."

She leans back in her seat, closes her eyes, and smiles.

\*

We stop at the nearest hotel that doesn't look like it might have mutated rats scurrying under the blankets. Even though it's Harriett's money, I feel that the financially responsible thing is for Seth and I to share a room. We've spent enough time together that I'm pretty sure he's not a serial killer, nor will he sit in the chair next to me and stare at me all night while I sleep.

After checking in, we bid Harriett a good night, and then discover that we've accidentally been given a room with a single king-sized bed. But the hotel clerk apologizes and moves us to a room with two twin beds, so we avoid wacky hijinks.

I'm too exhausted to even take a shower. I simply brush my teeth, plop onto my bed, and am asleep within minutes.

Then I'm awake a few minutes after that, because Seth is snoring. It alternates between sounding like he's revving a chainsaw and sounding like he's choking to death on his own phlegm.

I tell him to roll over. He rolls onto his side, then resumes snoring.

I press a pillow over my ears, but it's not sufficient to block the sound. I could use the pillow to smother him, but, no, that would be wrong. I try to think about something pleasant, like being in a room where nobody is snoring.

How can the human body even produce those sounds? We're off to fight a Cyclops, but our real concern should be that Seth has clearly been possessed by the devil. I wish I had some holy water. His screams of pain as it sizzled his flesh would be less annoying than the snoring.

He says something.

"What?" I ask.

He says something else that I can't understand. If he's going to talk in his sleep along with the snoring, I *am* going to smother him with this pillow. Anybody else would do the same.

*"Graspin the Colossal is here to save the day,"* he says.

Then he goes back to snoring.

Ultimately, I elect not to end his life. My exhaustion finally overcomes the ghastly noises, and I fall asleep, until about twenty minutes later when he gets up to pee.

\*

"I dreamt of flowers," Harriett tells us, as we dine on hotel bagels. "I usually only remember my nightmares, but last night I dreamt of beautiful, colorful, fragrant flowers. I was dancing in them."

"Was Mitchell there?" I ask.

Harriett smiles. "Yes, he was."

"Was he fully clothed?"

"The flowers are the part of the dream that I have chosen to share with you. The rest is irrelevant."

I look at her more closely. "Are you blushing?"

"Of course not."

"Actually, you are," says Seth. "Your cheeks are lighting up like Rudolph's nose."

"Enough," says Harriett.

"At least you'll be able to raise your babies in a world without a Cyclops," says Seth.

"I will not be procreating with him. He is handsome and smells nice, but he is not father or even husband material."

"So you just used him for your own selfish needs?" I ask.

"Did he know he was only a boy-toy?" Seth asks.

"You both have a great deal of maturing to do. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to close my eyes and remember dancing in the flowers."

We're back on the road. Seth offered to drive, but unless I'm going to take a nap, I'd rather be the one behind the wheel.

In theory, a full day of driving will get us to our destination tonight. This assumes that our destination won't change. I don't mind a short detour, but if we approach the Arizona border and then Harriett says we need to take a side trip to Massachusetts, I may have a mild nervous breakdown.

We get sushi for lunch. Harriett has never had it, although she says she's eaten plenty of raw fish in her life.

She falls asleep shortly after we get back on the highway. This concerns me a little, because she could sleep through the moment when she realizes where we're supposed to go next. Will she say that we have to backtrack a couple of hours? Or will she miss it altogether?

It suddenly occurs to me that I'm simply assuming that she *will* lead us to another person who feels that this journey is his or her destiny. How the hell did that happen? Her success with Seth notwithstanding, I don't believe in this stuff.

Anyway, I decide to let her sleep. She knows what she's doing.

We cross into New Mexico, and I suddenly am in the mood for red and green chiles, even though we only had lunch an hour ago. I can wait. We'll be in this state for several hours. The red and green chiles will still be here.

We stop in Albuquerque. A vote is taken, and we decide to be Hobbits and have a second lunch. Burritos for everybody.

About an hour and a half after that, Harriett says, "I know where our third and final hero is."

"Where?" I ask. "Please don't say South Dakota."

"Bridge Point."

"Is that the name of a town? Or is it literally a point on a bridge?"

"I am ninety percent sure that it's the name of a town."

"Where is it?"

"That I don't know."

We look it up. Miraculously, Bridge Point, New Mexico is only half an hour south of us. As long as she doesn't mean Bridge Point, Antarctica, we're in good shape.

A weather-beaten sign welcomes us to the town, population 13,219. "Any idea who we're looking for yet?" I ask.

Harriett shakes her head.

We drive around town for a while. It seems like a nice place. They've got a movie theater and a library, so if we have to hang out here while Harriett waits for her latest prophecy update, we'll be fine.

"I know who it is," she says.

"Who?"

"Maraud the Berserker."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Maraud the Berserker, huh?" I ask. "He sounds like a charming addition to our little group. Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Let's look him up, then."

Seth and I both do Internet searches with our cell phones, but come up with nothing.

"What's the plan?" I ask. "Wait for more info?"

"I'm not sure that I'll get more."

"Well, there probably aren't a lot of Maraud the Berserkers living in Bridge Point, New Mexico. Let's start with the closest game store."

Bridge Point does not, alas, have a game store, or a comic book shop, or any obvious place where a role-playing gamer might hang out. While I drive, Seth searches online for any gaming groups in the area, but has no luck.

"Maybe he's not a gamer," Seth says. "Maybe he's the lead singer for a death metal band."

"That's actually not a bad guess," I tell him. "I'd go see a death metal band fronted by Maraud the Berserker."

"I hate to cause trouble for everybody," says Harriett, "but we may have no choice but to simply ask around. I apologize in advance if this will make you feel foolish."

"I can handle it," I say.

I park at the library. We decide to split up and meet back there in an hour.

I do indeed feel stupid going into various businesses and asking if they've heard of him, though I deflect it somewhat by starting each query off with, "This is going to sound weird, but..."

Nobody has heard of Maraud the Berserker. They can't even point me in the direction of a person whose social group might contain somebody with that moniker. One gentleman does say, "Sounds like my three-year-old! Haw, haw, haw!" but it's not helpful.

I reunite with Harriett and Seth an hour later. Neither of them have had any success. We can't think of a better plan than to continue asking around, so we split up for another hour.

An elderly woman at a cupcake shop offers to tell me everything

she knows in exchange for a purchase. I buy a red velvet cupcake, and she says that she knows nothing. The cupcake is stale.

Fifteen minutes before I'm supposed to be back at the library, I ask a bartender, who has never heard of him. But as I walk toward the exit, a man in an ill-fitting brown suit waves me over to his booth.

"Sit down, sit down," he says.

I sit across from him. I can't quite discern his age in the poor light, though I'm fairly sure that his thick black mustache is dyed.

"You're looking for Maraud the Berserker?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"You a cop?"

"No."

"He owe you money?"

"No, nothing like that. I want to offer him a job. It's sort of a—"

"No need to explain. I don't want to know." The man strokes his mustache. "You got a card?"

I take a business card out of my wallet and write down my cell phone number. "Just FYI, I don't work there anymore."

"That's not important. This is just to make sure you are who you say you are." He tucks the card into his suit pocket, and takes a pen and small notebook out of the same pocket. "You had amazingly good timing, my friend. Amazingly good. You can meet him tonight." He writes a phone number on the paper, tears it out of the notebook, and slides it across the table to me. "Call this number at eleven-forty-five. If the screening checks out, you'll be given a place to be at midnight. Admission is five hundred bucks. Cash, obviously. There's a twenty-four-hour cash advance place right around the corner if you need it."

"Five hundred dollars? Seriously?"

The man chuckles. "It's worth it. Don't bring any weapons. You'll be searched before you go in, and if you've got weapons or a wire or any kind of recording device, it will be a terrible night for you. Come alone."

"I'll need to bring a friend. She wants to talk to him herself."

"It's a she? No admission fee for her, then. Same rules about weapons and wires apply. They'll repeat these rules for you when you call, in case you forget."

"I don't suppose you could just give me his contact information?"

"Nope. Relax, you'll have a memorable night."

\*

Seth is already there when I return to the library. "Any luck?" he

asks.

"I've got a solid lead. Not an appealing lead, but a solid one. I'll explain when Harriett gets here."

Harriett looks kind of despondent when she arrives. She cheers up when I tell her what I know.

"I've got the money," she says.

"Now, you understand that if they're going to search us before we go in, it's probably not a casual dinner event, right?"

"Yes."

"You need to be okay with the idea that it sounds like it might be a sex party."

Harriett frowns. "I beg your pardon?"

"That's the vibe I'm getting. I'm not saying that *we'll* have to have sex. I know I won't be having any. You can make your own choice, but I assume that you're not interested."

"I am most definitely not."

"Didn't think so. What I'm saying is that other people may be having sex around us, and it might be really weird sex, so you have to be prepared for it."

"How much was admission?" Seth asks.

"Five hundred dollars. You're not going."

"If it is something of that sort, I'll avert my eyes as much as possible and we won't stay long," says Harriett.

"And I hate to say this, but if he's some big guy in a thong, he's not getting in my car. He can find his own transportation."

"We will address that after we meet him."

We check into a hotel, getting three separate rooms this time, and I lie on the bed, trying to relax. Hopefully we can talk to Maraud, get him to weep over his destiny, and be out of there in a hasty manner.

A couple of hours later, with no relaxation acquired, we meet back down in the lobby so I can make my eleven-forty-five call.

A scratchy male voice answers. "Mr. Portin?" The voice is kind of creepy, giving me a flashback to a pre-caller-ID era when him knowing my name would've been unnerving.

"Yes."

"You've been approved. Midnight at 1247 Galwick Avenue. Do not bring any weapons or recording devices. They will be confiscated and not returned. Please make sure that you've counted your admission fee before you hand it to the doorman, because it makes everybody unhappy when we have to collect the shorted amount. Do you need the address again?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

"See you at midnight."

I disconnect the call. We decide that Seth will come with us but



wait in the car, and though he will not have his entire bag of weapons next to him, he'll have one sword, which he'll use exclusively to intimidate somebody in the extremely unlikely event that we have to flee from somebody chasing us back to the car.

It takes us about ten minutes to drive to the address. From the outside, it looks like a warehouse, taking up about half a block.

"Ah, abandoned warehouses," says Seth. "Where all the best crime happens."

There's no parking permitted on the street in front of the building, so we have to drive to a parking garage a couple of blocks away. I leave the car keys with Seth, and he promises that, if things get ugly, he'll be a skilled getaway driver.

Of course, things won't get ugly. We're not walking into a dangerous situation. I may be scarred by the things we see, and Harriett may have her perception of human sexuality irrevocably altered, but we won't be in actual, physical peril.

Well, unless Maraud the Berserker is a drug dealer.

Or a drug user. A guy whacked out on crystal meth could, conceivably, acquire the nickname "Berserker."

Hopefully it's just a sex party. It's not a betrayal of Becky's memory as long as I don't touch anything, and I'll do everything in my power to stop any stray body parts from brushing against me.

We walk over to a steel door. I knock.

A few moments later, the door swings open. A sweaty, unshaven middle-aged man with a huge belly stands there. "Name?"

"Evan Portin."

He looks at a clipboard, then glances at Harriett.

"And she's your plus-one?"

"Yes."

"All right. Come on in."

We walk inside. I hear the lock engage as he shuts the door behind us.

We're in a small waiting room. Faintly, I can hear the sounds of people shouting like they're at a sporting event. This must be quite a sex party.

"Admission?" he asks.

Harriett hands him a roll of twenties. He flips through them very quickly, then, satisfied, opens a desk drawer and tosses them inside.

"Arms out," says the man, demonstrating for us. Harriett and I put our arms out. The man gives me a very generous pat down, though he doesn't linger on the erogenous zones, then does the same to Harriett, who endures it without beating him up.

"You're good," he says. He opens another door, and waves us through. The crowd is much louder now.

They're watching a cage fight. Son of a bitch.

There are about fifty people outside of the cage, seated on folding chairs. Inside the cage, which is about ten feet on each side, are two large, shirtless men. They both have blood on them, although one has more blood on his face and chest, and the other has more blood on his knuckles.

We've arrived just in time to see one absolutely brutal punch, which knocks the guy with blood on his face and chest against the cage wall. He tumbles forward and hits the cement floor.

About half of the crowd cheers, then everybody begins to chant-count backward from ten.

At four, the fallen fighter reaches up, grabs a metal link of the cage, and starts to pull himself up. But his hand slips off and he drops back to the floor. He doesn't try to get up again before the crowd finishes counting.

There's a mix of cheers and boos. A guy in a referee suit opens the cage door, and the winner emerges, waving his arms in victory. Two other men, dressed in white jumpsuits (presumably to better show off the blood), walk into the cage. They each take one of the loser's arms and drag him out. They continue dragging him to the corner of the room, behind a black curtain.

"Wasn't that great?" the referee, who I guess is also the announcer, says into his wireless microphone.

The crowd cheers their assent that it was, indeed, quite great. They're mostly men, mostly middle-aged, and mostly have crazed-looking eyes.

Harriett and I probably shouldn't just stand around. There are a few empty folding chairs, so we sit down in the ones that are as far from the cage as possible. This is still only about eight feet away, though a couple of the spectators are sitting close enough that their knees are pressed against the bars. Seems kind of dangerous.

"Are you ready for our next challenger?" the referee asks the crowd. The crowd cheers in the affirmative. "Please, put your hands together for...Cuh-Runch!"

"Cuh-Runch! Cuh-Runch! Cuh-Runch!" the crowd chants, as a very muscular man jumps to his feet, knocking over his chair. He's got a shaved head, and apparently did it right before he got here, because a couple of the nicks are still bleeding.

He tears off his shirt, tosses it to one of the three women in the audience, then does a slow jog into the cage.

"And his competitor, one of our favorites, put your hands together and howl in primal fury for...Maraud the Berserker!"

Harriett and I both sit up. A man walks out from behind the curtain. He's huge. A little flab, but mostly muscle. He's got a thick

gray beard, and his gray hair hangs all the way down to the waist of his blue shorts. He doesn't acknowledge the cheering audience as he walks over to the cage. He steps inside and saunters to the opposite corner from where Cuh-Runch stands.

I don't know how he's going to fit into the back of my car, but he does seem like he'd be a valuable asset in a Cyclops hunt.

The referee slams the cage door shut. He points to a man sitting near the front. "Dice-Man! Roll 'em!"

The man is wearing a black t-shirt with "Dice-Man" written on the front. He holds up a pair of oversized dice, shakes them, and tosses them onto the floor.

"A five and a three!" the referee announces. "Not even close!"

The crowd groans in disappointment. Dice-Man gathers his dice and sits back down.

"The fight begins...*now!*"

Cuh-Runch moves to the center of the cage. Maraud, looking annoyed, stays where he is. The crowd is suddenly a lot quieter than they've been since we arrived.

"Come on!" says Cuh-Runch. "Let's do this!"

Maraud steps forward. Cuh-Runch lunges at him and punches him in the face. I wince. Maraud barely seems to feel the impact.

"Please don't do that again," he says.

Cuh-Runch now seems a bit unsure of himself. He steps back, but then steps forward again and throws another punch. Maraud doesn't even try to dodge. He just takes the blow to the jaw. A thin trickle of blood runs down the side of his mouth.

The crowd is completely silent, watching with rapt attention.

"I asked you not to do that again," he says. "Don't make me ask you a third time."

Cuh-Runch moves to the center of the ring. "Come on!" he shouts. "Fight me! That's why we're here! Fight me!"

Maraud stays in place. He wipes the blood off his mouth and onto his pants. He seems to be thinking about how now he's going to have to do a load of laundry.

Cuh-Runch rushes forward. He feints a punch that doesn't fool Maraud, then delivers a real blow that sends Maraud stumbling back against the cage wall.

Suddenly Maraud's demeanor completely changes. He looks really, *really* pissed. His hands clench into fists. I am incredibly glad that I am not the one in that cage with him.

"*What did I just ask you?*" he bellows.

And then Maraud goes, well, berserk. Before Cuh-Runch can run away, which is exactly what he looks like he wants to do, Maraud has grabbed him by the shoulders and is slamming him against the cage

wall, over and over.

Now the crowd is cheering.

From where Harriett and I are seated, we can't see Cuh-Runch's back until Maraud is finally done with the slamming. As Maraud pulls him away, I see that the cage wall is dripping red, and when Maraud throws him face-first to the floor, I see a lot more red on his back.

I look over at Harriett. Her hand is over her mouth and she looks horrified. I agree that this is more wince inducing than throwing somebody over a second-floor rail.

Cuh-Runch rolls over as Maraud crouches down next to him. He grabs a handful of Maraud's beard, which does not go over well. After two slams against the cement floor, Cuh-Runch releases his grip on the beard, and after another slam, he releases his grip on consciousness.

"All right, all right, time to step away!" says the referee.

Maraud stands up and wanders back to the corner of the cage. The crowd counts down from ten to one, but Cuh-Runch doesn't do anything except breathe a little.

"Your winner, Maraud the Berserker!" says the referee, to overwhelming audience approval. He opens the door to the cage. Maraud walks out, looking ambivalent about the whole thing, and returns to the curtained area. The two men in white-and-red jumpsuits drag Cuh-Runch out of the cage and back to the curtained area, leaving a red trail behind him, which another guy quickly mops up.

"What should we do?" I ask Harriett. "Should we just go back there and try to talk to him?"

"Yes. We don't want him to leave out the back."

As Harriett stands up, the referee points to her. "And there's our next challenger! Everybody put your hands together for the Red-Haired Fury!"

Both of us look around. He can't really mean Harriett, can he? We didn't volunteer for this.

It's quickly clear that, yes, he means Harriett.

"Thaaaaaaat's right," says the referee. "It's just like Fight Club. If this is your first time, you've got to get in the cage!"

The audience laughs and cheers. Apparently we are not the first people to have shown up to one of these events without being made aware of this particular rule.

What the hell do we do? Try to politely decline? Make a run for it?

I stand up. "Sorry," I say. "There's been a misunderstanding. We're just here to speak with Maraud."

"He'll still be here when you're done!" says the referee. "Come on down, Red-Haired Fury!"

"I don't even get to pick my own name?" asks Harriett.

"No, really," I say, "this isn't at all why we're here. We're not going to participate. We'll just excuse ourselves and try not to spoil anybody's fun."

"How adorable," says the referee. "He thinks it's optional. Red-Haired Fury, everybody's waiting!"

Harriett waves for me to sit down. "I can do this."

Without waiting for me to protest, Harriett walks over to the cage and steps inside. I plop back into the folding chair, feeling as if I've already been punched in the gut.

"And her competitor," says the referee. "Give a bloodthirsty squeal to Lady Dooooooooom!"

Lady Doom, unless her stage name really is Lady Dooooooooom, stands up. She's dressed entirely in black leather, and looks old enough to vote and drink but not old enough to rent a car. She does a premature victory lap around the cage, getting the entire audience except for me to stand up and cheer.

She waves to the crowd and steps into the cage. The referee slams the door shut. "Dice-Man!"

The Dice-Man rolls.

"A six and a three," says the referee. "Oh, so close! The fight begins...*now*!"

Harriett and Lady Doom walk to the center of the cage.

Harriett punches her in the face.

Lady Doom drops to the floor and is still.

The crowd is kind of confused for a few moments. People look at each other, trying to figure out if that's really it, but there's no evidence that Lady Doom is going to get back up in a timely manner.

Valuable seconds are ticking away. I begin to count, "Ten! Nine! Eight!"

The crowd joins in. By the end of the countdown, Lady Doom remains unconscious at Harriett's feet. The referee opens the cage door, and Harriett emerges, victorious. The crowd, now firmly on her side, cheers.

I wonder if there's a cash prize?

The men in jumpsuits drag Lady Doom out of the cage.

"And now, we know who's next!" the referee tells the crowd. They all turn to look at me. I've never felt so physically ill in my life, except for that whole long recent stretch where my wife was dying, but if you discount that, I've never felt so physically ill in my life.

I can't do a freakin' cage fight. That's madness.

I really feel like I should flee for the exit, even though it's almost definitely locked. But if I do, we've come here for nothing. Which may not be so bad, all things considered.

"No!" says Harriett. "I will fight in his place."

The referee laughs into the microphone. "This isn't the Hunger Games. You can't volunteer for somebody else."

"I insist."

"Insistence overruled. Everybody put your hands together for Evan the Accountant!"

Okay, I can do this. I've already proven on this trip that I can handle getting beat up a little. Worst-case scenario, I'll drop right to the floor and go motionless for ten seconds.

Harriett looks frantic and helpless as I very slowly walk toward the cage. Nobody actually said what kind of penalty there would be for flat-out refusing to participate. Will the audience descend upon me and tear me limb from limb? Will my picture go up on a Wall of Shame? Will the spectators cluck their tongues in disapproval?

I'll just get this over with. Hell, maybe I'll win.

I reach the cage door. I don't really want to expose my not-exactly-six-pack middle-aged abs, but I also don't want to mess up my shirt, so I take it off and toss it onto the floor. The crowd cheers as I walk into the cage.

"And his opponent, the ever-popular...Bloodlust Bernie!"

Bloodlust Bernie stands up. He is not, I'm thankful to note, as large as Maraud the Berserker. He is, however, much larger than I am, and at least ten years younger. He has approximately eighteen trillion tattoos and his fingernails are painted black.

He roars at the crowd, which goes crazy for him.

He jogs into the cage. God, he has a lot of muscles. This is not a fair fight. They should give me a crowbar or something.

I notice that I'm starting to breathe like somebody on the verge of having an all-out panic attack, which is not the image I want to convey to the audience. Deep, calming breaths. That's the key. Deep, calming breaths.

The referee slams the cage door shut.

"Dice-Man!"

The Dice-Man rolls his dice.

"Double sixes!" shouts the referee. The crowd gasps, and then goes absolutely batshit.

Bloodlust Bernie smiles at me, revealing three silver teeth.

"And you all know what that means!" says the referee. "This fight is...to the *deaaaaaaaath*!"

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The referee's words were spoken clearly and amplified through the microphone, but surely I didn't hear him correctly. To the death? To the freaking *death*?

Bernie winks. It's not a wink that says, *Ha ha, this is all a joke, so don't be concerned about your personal safety*, but rather, *I am going to kill you and be merry about it*.

"Whoa!" I say. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I wave my arms to try to get the referee's attention, but he's not looking at me, and I can't be heard over the crowd. Bernie is standing by the door, so I don't want to walk over there. Instead, I rattle the cage wall on my side.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. This is not what Harriett's five hundred dollars was supposed to purchase.

Harriett is looking all around the room. I think she's trying to figure out if she can successfully fight her way over to the cage, rescue me, and fight her way back out.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, this match will not end until one of our competitors lies dead on the floor," says the referee. "If you are squeamish, flee for the exits now!"

The audience laughs. Nobody flees for the exits.

"Since one of these men will be dead very soon, it's tradition to give them the opportunity to say their last words." He pokes the microphone through the cage at Bernie. "Bloodlust Bernie, if these are your last words, what do you want to say?"

"I want to say, *blood, blood, blood!*"

"Magnificent last words! And though I'm completely impartial, I suspect that they won't be your last." He walks to the other side of the cage and pokes the microphone at me. "Evan the Accountant, if these are your last words, what do you want to say?"

"People know where I am. If anything happens to me, all of you are responsible."

The crowd laughs.

"I'm serious," I say. "We've got a friend waiting outside, and if I never come out, there will be a full investigation."

"Oooooooooohhhhhh!" says the referee, waving his hands in mock fear. "Well, you've definitely given us something to think about, Evan

the Accountant. Fortunately for us, Mr. Tidy is on his way, and he is a master at making dead bodies disappear! My recommendation is to make sure it's not your body that's dead at the end of this fight!"

"Seriously," I say. "Let me out of here. You can't get away with this."

The crowd boos. Apparently I'm a whiner.

The referee steps away from the cage. He chuckles. "The fight begins...*now*!"

Bernie raises his fists.

They're not even going to give us weapons? Are we actually supposed to beat each other to death with our bare hands?

Harriett looks as if she's still trying to figure out a workable solution to our problem. I have very strong faith in her fighting abilities, but not against a bloodthirsty crowd of fifty people. There's got to be a way out of this that does not involve me getting beaten to death, or beating another human being to death, though nothing is coming to mind right now.

Bernie walks to the center of the cage, keeping his fists raised. Now that he's closer, I can see that his tattoos are a random assortment of images, including a rhinoceros, Willie Nelson, and a baby with an upside-down face.

"I'm not going to fight you," I tell him.

Bernie shrugs. "Easier for me. Come on. Get over here. Be a man."

The cage isn't tall enough for me to climb to the top and just hang there until the audience gets bored and leaves, so I guess I really do have to fight this guy.

I raise my fists. I try to walk to the center of the cage, but my feet are uncooperative, and I kind of stumble forward a couple of steps instead.

The audience, understanding that I have been placed in a difficult position, is polite and considerate and does not express amusement at me being a klutz, except for the part where they're all pointing and laughing hysterically.

I'm actually starting to get kind of pissed off, which is probably a good thing. Anger is very useful if I can harness it properly. I walk forward, stopping when I'm close enough to Bernie that it doesn't look like I'm chickening out, but more than an arm's length away.

"Can I have one free punch?" I ask.

"No," Bloodlust Bernie says.

I come up with a plan where I'll start sobbing like a baby, and then when Bernie is distracted by his sense of disgust, I'll punch him in the face. It's not a virtuous plan, but I'm not all that concerned with fair fighting right now.

Before I can enact my plan, Bernie punches me in the face.



I don't think it's the exact same spot where Reggie punched me, but it's close enough, I'm sure, to restore the bruise to its former glory. I let out a cry of pain; not an all-out wail, but enough to let the audience know that this did not feel good.

Bernie punches me on the other side of the face, so at least now my bruises will be symmetrical.

I don't fall. I want to fall, but I can't control my legs even when all I'm asking them to do is stop supporting my torso.

I take a swing of my own. Bernie easily steps out of the way. I swing with the other fist, and he dodges that one, too. Then Bernie steps forward and throws a punch that I fail to dodge.

Now I hit the floor. Based on the audience's reaction, I can't help but feel that they're rooting for Bernie over me.

"Get up!" Bernie says.

This would be a wonderful time to glance out of the cage and see that Harriett has already subdued about eighty percent of the audience members. Though my vision is kind of a blur, it does not look as if this is the case.

"I said, get up!"

I suppose I should get up. I don't really want to.

Bernie is considerate enough to move away as I stand back up. Then he lunges forward, throwing a punch that I somehow block with my fist.

It turns out that blocking a punch with my fist hurts more than getting punched in the face.

It didn't feel so great for Bernie, either. He lowers his hand and groans in pain. I seize this opportunity to swing at his face with my non-hurting fist. I miss, but the crowd at least cheers me on for doing my best.

Bernie kicks me in the thigh, which I didn't realize was permitted. If I survive the night, this is going to make sitting in a car for long stretches really unbearable.

He kicks me again, in the same thigh. I lose my footing and land hard on my back, knocking the wind out of me. I lie there, gasping for breath.

Bernie walks over to me, and raises his foot above my neck. Unless I'm mistaken, he plans to slam it down upon my throat. My desire not to have my trachea crushed surpasses my desire to focus on being able to breathe again. Before he even stomps, I reach up, wrap both hands around his ankle, and yank his foot away from me.

I wasn't trying to break anything. However, I think I accidentally twisted while I was yanking, and Bernie lets out a scream unworthy of a fighting champion as he crashes down onto the cement. His legs land on my chest.

Since the rules of good sportsmanship apparently do not apply here, I punch him in the ankle. A harsher stream of profanity I have never heard. I hope Harriett isn't offended.

I punch him in the side, hitting his tattoo of a wiener dog right in the pointy snout. I pull myself out from underneath him.

Bernie clutches his ankle with both hands and continues to use language that you would not hear in church. The crowd is not impressed by his reaction to the pain, and the booing starts in full force.

I take a couple of seconds to massage my neck. It's hard to breathe, but I don't think I'm going to choke to death.

I grab a handful of Bernie's hair, lift his head, and then completely wuss out. I can't bash his skull against cement. Not even if I'm just trying to knock him unconscious. I can't really call myself a pacifist after the move where I punched his ankle, but I'm not about to expose anybody's brain matter.

I let go of his hair.

Bernie tries to take a big bite out of my arm.

I grab his hair again, and bonk him gently against the cement.

Bernie bellows in rage.

I bonk him again, still gently.

The crowd begins to chant. "*Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!*"

Were I so inclined, I could give him a few solid cracks against the floor and end this fight. But I am not even remotely inclined to do that. I'm not a murderer, even under duress. I just need for Bernie to stop thrashing around.

He makes another attempt to bite my arm. It would be a lame way to try to kill me even if he were rabid. I lose my grip on his hair, but I grab his nose and give it a great big twist. Bernie responds negatively.

"*My nobe!*" he shouts. "*My nobe! You broke mah nobe!*"

I didn't break his nose. I just reshaped it a little. I regain my grip on his hair, give him another gentle bonk, and ask him to quit moving. Since he refuses, I punch him in the chest, hitting a tattoo of a naked Wilma from The Flintstones.

I'm not a violent person, I swear, but what else am I supposed to do?

I give him another bonk. Then another. Then another. Though it may seem like I've regressed into savagery, these are all still gentle bonks. However, their cumulative effect is making Bernie a lot mellower.

Finally, he closes his eyes. I think he's faking it, but that's okay with me. I stand up and move away from him.

"That was ten," I tell the referee. "I won."

"What part of 'to the death' didn't you understand?" asks the

referee, speaking into the microphone so everybody can hear. "The 'death' part? That's a pretty important part." He turns to the audience and does something (possibly an exaggerated eye-roll) that amuses them. Credit where it's due: he's a fine showman.

"I'm not going to murder him," I say.

"That's a problem."

"I've clearly won the fight."

"Technically, no."

Bernie sits up, holding the back of his head with one hand and his nose with the other.

"Let me talk to the audience," I say. "If I can convince them to let me go, you'll do it, right?"

The referee chuckles. "If you can convince *this* crowd to overrule the roll of the dice, then you went into the wrong line of business, because you are the greatest lawyer who ever lived."

I gesture frantically. "Give me the mic."

The referee doesn't give it to me, but he does poke it through the cage.

"Maraud!" I say. "Maraud the Berserker! We're here to take you to kill a Cyclops!"

The audience looks perplexed, as you might expect after hearing such a thing out of context. The referee pulls the microphone away, which surprises me because if I were in his position of hosting the entertainment, I'd want to know what other weird shit the guy in the cage was going to say.

Bernie has stood back up, so I get to deal with that. Joy.

He runs at me. I move out of the way, extend my arm, and clothesline him. He lands on the cement again. I'm genuinely astonished to be winning this fight. I should be laughably inept. Maybe simply spending quality time with Harriett is enough to transform me into a fighting machine.

Again, I could walk on Bernie's neck and give them what they want, but that option is far, far down the list, below even "try to squeeze my way out through the holes in the cage like meat going through a grinder."

Maraud emerges from behind the curtain.

"What did you say?" he hollers.

Harriett stands up. "I have a scroll. I know your destiny."

I have never seen somebody look quite so flummoxed. It's as if Maraud's entire world has changed, but he's not sure if it's good or bad. He furrows his brow. His mouth drops open.

Dammit. Bernie is getting back up.

Maraud walks toward the cage door. The referee steps in front of him.

"Open it," says Maraud. The cage is, to the best of my knowledge, not actually locked, so having the referee open it would be a mere formality.

"No can do. You know that."

"Step out of the way."

"I'll ask the audience, but it has to be unanimous." The referee turns to the crowd. "What do you say? Should we let them out of the fight to the death?"

The crowd, overwhelmingly, boos and gives thumbs-down signs.

"Sorry, Maraud," says the referee with an exaggerated shrug. "I did my best."

Maraud shoves him out of the way.

It takes so little for everybody to start fighting that I have to believe that they were just waiting for an excuse, any excuse. Suddenly the whole room is in chaos. Punches are thrown, chairs are smashed against bodies, and battle cries are emitted.

Maraud opens the cage door just as Bernie grabs me from behind. The Berserker walks inside, and a moment later Bernie is hurtling toward the other side of the cage. I hear the impact as Maraud pulls me to safety.

Well, not safety, or even safer. Harriett seems to be holding her own, and Maraud is helpful to have on our side, but we're still just a wee tiny little bit outnumbered. I really don't know how we're going to— A folding chair bashes into the side of my head and I stop worrying about it.

\*

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is Harriett's face, gazing at me with concern.

Is she really surrounded by dozens of unconscious bodies?

No. That's just me not being quite awake yet. The only other body around is Maraud, who is crouched next to me. He has to crouch, because we're in a very small metal cage and he can't raise his head any higher.

The cage itself is in a tiny room that seems to have no other purpose than to store this cage.

"Are you okay?" Harriett asks. She's got several cuts and bruises of her own, and she's popped the stitches in her upper arm.

"Yeah," I lie. Actually, my head feels like there's a pinball bouncing around in it, except that the pinball explodes whenever it bounces against something, and it's covered in spikes, which should

impede its ability to roll around but for some reason does not. "You?"

"I'm not feeling perfect," she says.

"I can't help but think we're in a worse situation now than we were before I went to sleep," I say.

Harriett nods. "It's not a good one."

"What are they going to do with us?"

"Mr. Tidy is on his way," says Maraud. "His job is to clean up messes. He's going to kill us and make us disappear."

"Excuse me?"

"Kill us. Make us disappear."

"We've still got our ace in the hole, though," I say. "Our friend Seth will have done something by now. All we have to do is stay alive until help gets here."

The door opens. Seth walks into the room.

There's a gun to his head.

The first man in the now mostly red jumpsuit holds the gun while the second unlocks our cage. Harriett, Maraud, and I scoot over to give Seth some room as he climbs into the cage with us. The man shuts the cage door, snaps shut the padlock, and they leave.

This is now way more cramped than being in my car.

"Well," says Maraud. "Pretty dismal way to meet, isn't it?"

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"I've dreamt about a Cyclops every night for the past two weeks," Maraud tells us. "Didn't tell anybody about it. Didn't even think much of it. Just an odd recurring dream."

"Had you thought about Cyclopes before that?" I ask.

"Not any more than any normal person thinks about them. I think about them as much as I think about Medusa. That's not very much."

"So you haven't always felt like it's your destiny to slay one?"

"I still don't feel that way."

"That isn't why you tried to get me out of the cage? I mean, the other cage?"

"When you've been dreaming about a Cyclops, and then somebody comes to talk to you about a Cyclops, you want to hear what they've got to say."

"The Cyclops is real," says Harriett.

"That part, I'm not ready to buy. I just want to know how you know my dreams."

I look at Harriett. "I'd like to know why Maraud is dreaming about Cyclopes, Seth is fantasizing about them, and you were trained to kill them. Why isn't it consistent?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah, I assumed you didn't."

Harriett turns to Maraud. "After we make our escape, I'll show you a scroll that explains everything. This is your destiny, Maraud the Berserker."

"Just Maraud," he says.

"So, I'm all for talking about Cyclops stuff," says Seth, "but I just got brought in here at gunpoint when I tried to save your butts. I'd like to focus a little more on the short-term. I feel like I missed a lot."

"You did miss quite a bit," I say. "What happened to your sword?"

"If *Raiders of the Lost Ark* taught us anything, it's that you don't swing your sword at somebody who has a gun."

"That's reasonable. You're right, we need a plan."

"I'm not a big planner," says Maraud. "I live moment to moment."

"I respect that," I say. "But an alternative to that lifestyle is one where we figure out how we're not going to die when Mr. Tidy gets

here."

"We'll have to convince him of the importance of our quest," says Harriett.

"Oh, sure, that'll work. These are psychopaths who do cage fights. You can't use the word 'quest' around lunatics like these."

"Mr. Tidy was not at the fight," says Harriett. "Perhaps he abhors violence."

"He doesn't abhor violence! He's coming to kill us!"

"I know Mr. Tidy," says Maraud. "He does abhor violence. When he kills us, it will be humane."

"So what's *your* plan?"

"Reason with him."

"Oh. Okay, then. So, while we wait to reason with Mr. Tidy, can I ask why you're spending your nights like this? You seem like an intelligent guy."

"Fights are only once a month," says Maraud. "I hate them. But if I win, and I always win, I can make three thousand bucks. That's enough that I can spend the rest of my time reading and watching independent films. Fair trade."

"That really does sound like a sweet deal," says Seth. "I wish I could do that."

"You get nothing if you lose."

"Yeah, that's where it would fall apart for me."

"Has the Dice Man ever rolled double sixes on you?" I ask.

"Yes."

"And?"

"And I won the fight."

We're all quiet for a moment.

"Do you have a family?" Harriett asks him.

"I have three ex-wives who hate me."

"Did you reproduce?"

"Nope, thank God." He rubs his left leg. "Hate to do this, but I'm getting a cramp. Going to have to stretch."

We all rearrange ourselves in the cage so that Maraud can stretch his legs. It's bad enough that my whole body hurts and that the cage was never meant to accommodate four people (and, technically, I'd count Maraud as a person and a half), but it's also miserably hot in here. We're all covered in sweat and blood, and the smell is awful. If the residents of the small town we're supposed to be saving could see us now, they'd probably request a new batch of champions.

"Are you currently courting a fourth potential wife?" asks Harriett.

"Accepted my sexual orientation couple of years ago. Much happier now. If you're a large gay man with an Internet connection and a working car, you're not lonely. Good life."

Harriett raises an eyebrow and looks at me.

"That's awesome," says Seth. "I wish I were at least bi. I know there are disadvantages to being gay, with persecution and some civil liberties issues and all that, but as far as online hookups go, you've got it made."

"Making up for lost time. Wish I'd figured it out sooner. Wasn't fair to my ex-wives. They deserved better." Maraud shifts uncomfortably. "Sorry, need everyone to readjust again."

We all make room for him to stretch his legs.

"So," I say, "since I'm the skeptic of the group, this might sound better coming from me. We're on our way to Arizona. We don't know exactly where yet. Our goal is to find the Cyclops and slay him, which will save the residents of the small town where he's ruining things for everybody. Before that, we have to find a weapon that's at the bottom of a well. Are you in?"

"Not if we die."

"I thought you were going to reason with Mr. Tidy?"

"Going to *try* to reason with him. Not a reasonable man, though. Vegas odds, going to say ten-to-one that we all die in here."

"Okay, that's not good to hear, because I was kind of under the impression that you were optimistic."

"Not at all," says Maraud. "Sorry for giving that impression. No, we're pretty well screwed. Not in the habit of showing fear."

"But let's discuss the possibility that we are not minutes away from death," says Harriett. "Will you join us?"

"What does it pay?"

"There is no payment involved, except fulfillment of your destiny."

"You took away my livelihood, so that doesn't really work for me. I have nothing now. Wish I could sue you."

"I'm sure we can work something out," I say.

Seth raises his hand. "I just want to say that I'm totally cool with the idea of him getting paid when I'm not. That's how committed I am."

"Thank you," says Harriett.

"Don't mention it."

The door swings open. A very old man, slender almost to the point of being skeletal, walks inside. He's dressed in a dark blue suit and holds a small black leather bag. He looks like every step wracks his body with pain.

He closes the door behind him, then stands there, looking into the cage.

"Got yourselves into a mess, I see," he says.

"Yes, sir," says Harriett.

"And I get to clean it up." He sighs. He points to me. "Evan Portin.



Newly widowed, newly unemployed. You'll be missed by some, but not enough to cause problems for me."

If that's my eulogy, it was sure a crappy one.

"Maurice Halligan. Stage name, Maraud the Berserker. Sad to see you in this position."

"Sad to be here."

"Sad or not, I believe that the world will be better off without you, and I think you agree with that."

"Yep."

Mr. Tidy points to Seth. "Seth Lynch. I'm sure your parents will be very upset that you didn't return home. But you're very far from home, and I'm confident that they won't find your grave."

"I texted them my location right before I got here."

"No. You did not."

Seth curses under his breath.

Mr. Tidy points to Harriett. "And, last, Harriett Lancaster. There's not much information available about you, is there? But, like Mr. Portin and Mr. Lynch, you are very far from home, and I can extinguish you." He unzips his bag, reaches inside, and takes out a hypodermic needle. "Who would like to be first?"

Nobody volunteers.

"It won't hurt," says Mr. Tidy. "You'll feel a gentle tingle. Rather pleasant, in fact, although of course I haven't tried it myself. What about you, Mr. Portin? Would you like to start things off? Give me your arm."

I'm not aware of any instance in which assuring a captor that you won't say anything to anybody has worked, but I see no reason not to try it myself. "We won't say anything, I promise," I tell him. "You said yourself that nobody knows where we are. Just let us go and we won't say a word."

"No. And it's a little insulting that you would even take that approach."

"We can pay you."

"You already have. Your car has been confiscated and is being dismantled at this very moment. Inside they found weapons and approximately twelve thousand dollars in cash. Thank you for your donation."

Now my brain has finally accepted the reality that this man may indeed murder the four of us. I'm going to die in a cage like a lab animal, except without the contributions to science.

"Mr. Portin," he says, "please give me your arm."

"I don't think so."

Mr. Tidy gives us a cruel smile. "I always enjoy seeing human beings turn on each other. So, would one of you other three care to

give me Mr. Portin's arm, or should I change the order of your executions?"

"Make you a deal," says Maraud. "Let us go, all four of us, and I'll give you bacon."

Mr. Tidy looks intrigued. "You will?"

"Yeah. Within an hour."

Mr. Tidy seems to be considering the offer. I have no idea what is going on here. If I knew that this was how we could negotiate our way to freedom, I would have offered him a bacon cheeseburger with extra bacon and a bun made out of bacon-topped bacon.

"I thought your ex-wife won him in the divorce."

"She did. But it was a spite thing. I can convince her to give him up."

"Then, yes, I accept those terms. A couple of gentlemen will transport you there and back."

Mr. Tidy puts the hypodermic needle away. He walks back toward the door, still looking agonized with every step. We silently watch as he opens the door and slowly leaves the room.

"So you didn't mean, like, actual bacon, did you?" asks Seth.

"No. Bacon's a Dachshund. Mr. Tidy fell in love with her back when Denise and I were still together."

"He's not going to eat the dog, is he?" I ask.

"No, he's not going to eat the dog! He's going to give him a good home. What kind of question is that?"

"I don't think it was an unreasonable one," I say. "He's not morally sound. He might be a dog-eater."

"You think I'd give up my dog to get eaten?"

"It's your ex-wife's dog now."

"Doesn't mean I'd let Bacon get hurt. What kind of monster do you think I am?"

"Look, I love dogs as much as anyone," says Seth, "but even if Mr. Tidy was standing there with a knife and fork, if he's going to let us go, the wiener dog is a good trade."

"He's not going to eat the dog," says Maraud.

"I understand that. I'm just saying that even if he *was*, you're doing the right thing."

"Wouldn't give up Bacon's life for you people. Don't even know you."

The two men in jumpsuits return to the room. One of them keeps a gun pointed at us, while the other lets Maraud out of the cage. The idea that we will be shot if anybody else tries to get out of the cage is not explicitly stated but very strongly implied. I hope that Maraud will go berserk and subdue them before they lock the cage again, but he doesn't.

"Back as soon as possible," he says, as they lead him out of the room.

"Do you think it makes me look bad that I'm okay with the dog being eaten?" asks Seth. "I mean, I'm glad that the dog will be treated well. That's the preferred outcome. I just think that the lives of the four of us are worth a dog. Maybe I'd feel differently if I'd met Bacon."

I think there are more important conversations we could be having right now. I stretch out, enjoying the disappearance of Maraud's bulk.

"I know we're supposed to be celebrating the fact that we may not die tonight," I say, "but you both caught the part where he said that my car was being dismantled, right? And the money and weapons are gone. What are we going to do about that?"

"I assumed that they'd give the money and weapons back after they let us go," said Seth.

"Why the hell would you think that?"

"I guess my mind couldn't cope with any other possibility."

"Let's face it," I say, "our whole little Cyclops-slaying adventure is over. We have nothing."

"I understand your cynicism," says Harriett. "Personally, as long as I draw breath and am reasonably mobile, I will not give up."

"Well, good. I admire that. Meanwhile, I'm going to figure out how to get a bus ticket back to Florida, so that I can try to rebuild the pile of smoldering debris that is my life."

Harriett puts her hand on my shoulder. "Evan, I feel that we've become friends throughout this experience. Right now, while we're still trapped in a cage awaiting an uncertain fate, it is perfectly sensible that you'd want to return home. All I ask is that you postpone the final decision until we're no longer in peril."

"Sure. Fine. Whatever. Why not?"

"What do we do now?" asks Seth.

"I guess relax until Maraud gets back."

\*

About an hour later, the door opens again. Maraud and one of the men, who has still not changed out of his bloodstained jumpsuit, walk inside the small room.

"We're all set," says Maraud.

I sit up so quickly that I bang my head on the top of the cage. "Really?"

"Yep. Had to kidnap the dog, but it's all good."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The still-sweaty unshaven guy who'd taken our admission fee tosses some cards onto the desk. It's our driver's licenses and credit cards. Then he tosses Harriett's passport onto the desk, followed by our cell phones.

"That's all you get," he says.

"What about my shirt?" I ask.

"Nope."

"My shirt doesn't have any resale value. Why be needlessly crappy?"

The sweaty guy grins. "Why does it surprise you that people who run to-the-death cage matches are sadistic?"

"Come on, there's a picture of my wife in my wallet, and it's the only copy of that picture I have. I'm a widower. Show some heart."

"Sorry. Already burned it."

"What about my scroll?" Harriett asks.

"No scroll for you, babe."

"Did you burn it?"

"Maybe."

"If you didn't burn it, I'd very much like it back. This is for your benefit as well as mine, because not returning it will work out poorly for you."

The sweaty guy gives her the finger. I'm not sure if Harriett knows what that means.

"We're giving you back the bare minimum you need to get home. You're lucky we did that. When you walk out of here, you're going to forget all about tonight, or it won't just be the picture of his dead wife that gets set on fire. Got it?"

"I completely understand," says Harriett. "But I'd still like my scroll returned."

"You want your scroll back?"

"Yes, please."

The sweaty guy opens his desk drawer and takes it out. "I was going to have it appraised at an antiques place, but if you want it back..."

He holds up the scroll, then slowly tears it in half. He holds those

two pieces together and tears them in half. He rips those four pieces into eight, and then the eight into sixteen, and then the sixteen into thirty-two. Harriett's face is expressionless. He lets the pieces sprinkle onto the desk, then pushes them toward her.

"Here you go."

"Thank you," Harriett says, gathering the pieces.

"Now get out of here. Tell anybody, and terrible things will happen. Have a nice day."

\*

Harriett, Seth, Maraud, and I walk down the sidewalk. We're all in a lot of pain, except for Seth, and though we're happy to be alive, we're not in a particularly cheery mood.

Our cell phone batteries have been drained, presumably to discourage us from immediately calling the police. But Maraud insists that "terrible things will happen" is a promise that they are very much capable of keeping. Forgetting about the past few hours is the best course of action.

I'm angry about the entire situation, but I have to admit that the scroll thing pissed me off the most. Enough that I almost want to continue the journey just out of spite over their attempt to screw us over.

"May I speak to you as if you were the man who tore up my scroll?" Harriett asks me.

"Excuse me?"

"I wished to say something to him, but since the dangerous situation had been resolved, I didn't want to create a complication. Therefore, I was more polite than I desired to be. I would like to recreate what I would have said with you in his role."

"Uh, sure."

Harriett holds up the handful of scroll pieces. "I don't need these," she hisses at me. "I memorized the contents long ago, and I've already shown the scroll to everybody who needs to see it. I simply don't want it to remain in the filthy, sweaty, greasy, repugnant hands of a disgusting and morally compromised wretch such as yourself. I wish you nothing but the worst." She lowers her hand. "Thank you, Evan. I needed to get that out. I feel better now."

"This is where I say goodbye," says Maraud. "Wasn't good to meet you. Hope our paths don't cross again. Good night."

"You're leaving us?" asks Harriett.

"Of course I am."

"What about your dreams?"

"I assume I talk in my sleep, and it got picked up by my cell phone, which I stupidly keep too close to my bed. You hacked in, and this is some sort of con game."

"You really believe that?" I ask.

"Compared to what? That you want me to go with you to a magical land and knock off a Cyclops?"

"It's not a magical land," says Seth. "It's Arizona."

"Sorry, everyone. You got my attention for sure, but I'm not that gullible."

"I was in a fight to the death," I say. "Why would I do that as part of a con game?"

"You didn't know it was a fight to the death."

"All right. Good point. But I swear to you, there's no con here. I'm not saying that we're correct or even sane, but we're not trying to scam you."

"Even if you're not, the way things have gone so far, you're not people I should be hanging out with. Lucky I didn't leave you in the cage. If the deal was to trade Bacon for only my life, I assure you, I would've taken it."

"We have sacrificed a great deal to find you," says Harriett. "Many lives are at stake. We desperately need your help. We can't offer much, or anything at this point, but it's imperative that you join us. Please, Maurice."

"I don't hurt women, so if you call me Maurice again," he points to me, "I'll break *his* neck."

"I apologize," says Harriett. "Please, Maraud."

"Nope. But I wish you luck."

"Can I tell him the truth?" I ask Seth, because I'm not entirely sure that Harriett will play along.

Seth gives me a solemn nod.

"We're bounty hunters," I say. "Our target is called The Cyclops, but of course he's not a real Cyclops, he's a man with one eye. We found you because, yes, we've been conducting mass surveillance. What I mean is, we have a relationship with an agency that's conducting mass surveillance, and they passed your contact information along. Our secrecy's been compromised, so we can't do the job ourselves, and so we need you to kill The Cyclops for us."

Maraud snorts out a laugh. "If that were true, why would you make up the other story?"

"To not have to share our seven hundred and fifty-thousand dollar fee."

Maraud suddenly looks very serious.

"It's the truth," says Harriett.

Seth nods. "We're either assassins, or we're whack-nut screwballs on our way to kill a mythical creature. Which do you believe?"

"You're no assassin," Maraud tells him.

"Well, no, I'm the intern. I don't get a cut of the fee. I'm just here to learn."

"Come with us," I say, "and we'll divide the fee three ways."

"What if we don't kill The Cyclops?"

"Then we get nothing."

"How dangerous is this going to be?" Maraud asks.

"Pretty damn."

"All right. I'm in."

\*

Maraud lets us crash at his apartment, which is not a place designed for three extra overnight guests. Harriett sleeps on the couch, while Seth and I get the floor. We have a coin toss for which one of us gets the clean blanket, and I lose.

The apartment smells about the way one might expect an apartment to smell when the only resident is a man nicknamed "Maraud the Berserker." I'm not suggesting that my own aroma is any better at this point, although I feel like Maraud's shower may have made it even worse. The muck on the walls is so thick that I'm surprised there aren't mushrooms growing out of it.

"Want something to eat?" asks Maraud. "I've got canned asparagus and..." He looks through the refrigerator, "...actually, the asparagus is all I can vouch for."

"No, thank you," I say.

"No, thank you," says Harriett.

"I'll take some," says Seth.

Maraud's charger is compatible with my cell phone, so I plug it in while Seth gazes at me with envy. I check my e-mail (nothing interesting) and listen to my voice mails (Marjorie asking how my road trip is going), then leave it to charge overnight. Harriett goes into the bathroom to re-stitch the cut on her shoulder, though after all we've been through I could probably watch her do it without getting queasy.

The kitchen sink, bathroom sink, and bathtub faucet drip all night. There's also some sort of drip in the ceiling. Each of these drips sounds like it has a megaphone propped up next to the source. Also, the hard floor seems to exacerbate Seth's snoring.

It is not a restful night of sleep.



In the morning, Maraud packs some clothes in a suitcase, and also lets me borrow a shirt, which is four sizes too large and has dark stains in the armpits. He offers to let me borrow socks and underwear, but I decline his generous offer. We'll all need to buy new clothes anyway.

After I call Marjorie, again failing to share the Cyclops element of my road trip, we walk to a diner across the street. Harriett, Seth, and I are famished, and we gobble down our pancakes and omelets at an alarming rate, but the three of us combined cannot match the amount of food that Maraud devours. He should have his own reality show. When the server asks if it's all on one check, he says yes, and then slides it over to me.

I'm hoping that he owns a big, luxurious minivan. He does not. It's a small brown pickup truck. There's only enough room for two people in the cab, so two of us are going to have to sit in the back. Harriett and I volunteer. Seth offers to take the next shift.

And then our journey resumes.

About three minutes later, Maraud pulls over to the side of the road. The passenger door opens, and Seth gets out. He climbs into the back with us.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"He says I talk too much."

"Why didn't you promise to stop talking?"

"I did, but I guess I was too wordy about it."

Maraud begins driving again, without asking Harriett or I if we want to move to the front. This may be for the best. We've told Maraud that we're headed toward Phoenix, with plans to adjust our route when Harriett figures out the actual location of the well. Harriett's skills at deception are poor, so the "magical sense of where we're supposed to go" conversation should probably happen out of Maraud's earshot.

"Are you sure we shouldn't just sic the cops on those guys?" Seth asks. "I spent years collecting those weapons. Maces aren't cheap."

"You're not going to get your weapons back," I say. "Those creeps are long gone by now. I'm sure they move around from month to month."

"They can't move around *too* far, if doing those fights is how Maraud made his living."

"They all deserve imprisonment," says Harriett. "And it's something we will actively pursue after we succeed at our original goal, but it would be too much of a distraction right now. The longer we delay, the greater the chance that Maraud will change his mind. I want Maraud with us. He is very strong."

"Maybe we'll capture the Cyclops instead of kill it, and it can

wreak vengeance on our behalf," says Seth.

Harriett ignores him and looks at me. "I need to say how sorry I am about this. I never imagined that you would sustain so much physical punishment and have your wallet stolen multiple times."

"It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is."

"I guess it's your fault, but, no, I don't blame you. For some messed-up reason that I can't quite pinpoint, I'm still here voluntarily."

"Perhaps now you're helping a friend."

I smile. "Could be. Or else I have nothing else to go back to. Between those two, I prefer the idea that I'm helping a friend."

"I promise that I will pay you back for what you've lost. The home I left is small but has been properly maintained, and after I sell it, I will make us even. I mean financially. I will always be in your debt in other ways."

Maraud hits a bump. I bounce and then groan in pain.

"I want a hot tub," I say.

Once we're on the highway, doing seventy miles per hour, the truck and wind are too loud for us to have a conversation, so we just sit there silently, except for the wincing of pain each time we get jostled.

Seth says something to me after about half an hour, but I can't hear it.

"What?"

"I have to pee!"

"Don't tell me. Tell him."

Seth half-stands and carefully walks over to the rear window. He raps on the glass. Maraud glances back at him.

"I have to pee!" Seth shouts.

Maraud nods and pulls over at the next exit.

He accommodates the second request with a grunt of annoyance. The third time, he gives Seth the finger through the window and continues driving. Seth asks Harriett and I if this means that Maraud wants him to just pee in the back of the truck, because he will if that's what Maraud wants, he doesn't care, he'll do it. I firmly dissuade him of that notion.

Seth holds it for a few more twitchy minutes, then knocks on the window. Maraud gives him the finger again.

"All right," Seth tells us. "He's left me no choice. Harriett, avert your eyes."

Harriett averts her eyes. I, foolishly, cannot turn away as Seth duck-walks to the rear of the truck, then stands up and unzips his pants. The one car visible behind us is too far away for the passengers to see the horror that is about to be unleashed upon the highway.

Is Maraud the Berserker the kind of man who would give a gentle tap of the brakes while Seth is standing up in mid-pee? I think he might be.

"Keep your eyes and mouth tightly closed," I tell Harriett.

"Whatever you do, keep them closed until I give you the all-clear."

Seth braces himself against the truck with his left hand as he pees over the back. I accept an unpleasant truth about myself as I realize that if I were driving, I cannot say with one hundred percent certainty that I would not give a gentle tap of the brakes.

Maraud, who is apparently more mature than I, does not apply the brakes. Nor does he swerve, or honk, or do anything that might interrupt Seth.

At least not on purpose. He does, however, hit a bump. Seth falls, tumbles, and sprays.

The next portion of the ride is much less pleasant.

\*

We've now been in Arizona for about two hours, and we're three hours away from Phoenix.

"Any prophecy updates yet?" I ask Harriett.

She shakes her head.

"That's fine. No rush. I'm sure it'll happen soon."

\*

Two hours from Phoenix.

"Anything?" I ask.

"Not yet," Harriett tells me.

"Is there any kind of Zen mode you can go into to speed up the process?"

"It has to happen naturally."

"Okay. We've still got a couple of hours. Nothing to worry about."

Seth, who was banished to the far side of the truck, scoots over so we can hear him. "Do you think Maraud will be mad if we get to Phoenix and have no idea where to go next?"

"Yes," I say. "I believe that he will be."

One hour from Phoenix.

"Anything yet?" I ask Harriett. I assume that she would have told me if she felt anything, so I'm being annoying by asking, but one query every hour isn't the equivalent of *Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?*

"Nothing. I'm sorry, Evan."

"It's okay. No big deal. We're still cool."

I glance over at Maraud. I can only see the back of his head, but I can easily picture him snarling.

Half an hour from Phoenix.

Harriett's eyes widen. "I've got it! I know the name of the town! And if we go in that direction, we'll find the well. The prophecy is suddenly making things very convenient for us!"

"What's the name of the town?"

"Rapport, Arizona."

"Perfect! Never heard of it." I take my cell phone out of my pocket and do a search for Rapport.

"Where is it?" Seth asks.

"I'm not sure. Nothing's coming up yet."

After a few minutes of searching, I can't find any online evidence of Rapport's existence.

"Can I try?" Seth asks.

I hand him my phone. He taps away at the cracked screen for a few minutes, brow furrowed in concentration.

"Are you sure it's a town?" Seth asks. "Maybe it's a store? A restaurant?"

"It's a town," says Harriett. "I know that for certain."

"Well, it's a town that doesn't exist."

"This could be a problem," I say.

Seth continues tapping at the screen. "Maybe its name has changed. Town names change sometimes, don't they?"

"That's possible," says Harriett. "Maybe this is an ancient name for a modern town."

"Still not pulling anything up, though."

"Perhaps the information is not contained within your electronic

device."

"*Everything* is online," Seth informs her.

"Okay, so, let's pretend we can't find it," I say. "Do you know anything else about it? The direction?"

Harriett closes her eyes for a moment. "I know that it's...not close."

"Crap."

"I feel that we should be traveling north."

"So, basically, the opposite direction that we've been going for the past couple of hours?"

"Yes."

"The prophecy didn't make things all that convenient, then."

"No."

"Well, this is going to give Maraud a warm fuzzy feeling."

"Don't be homophobic," says Seth.

"What?" I ask.

"That sounded kind of homophobic."

"How?"

"I'm not sure."

"'Warm fuzzy feeling' is a completely legitimate expression to use when you're being sarcastic about how somebody is going to react to having to turn around and drive back the way we came. It had nothing to do with his sexual orientation, and I'm not sure how that interpretation even works. It wouldn't make sense."

"Yeah, you're right," says Seth.

"But, to rephrase, that's going to make Maraud really angry."

"We don't know him that well. Maybe he's enjoying the drive. He might be happy that we've got a few more hours."

"I volunteer you to tell him."

"Oh, hell no."

"I'll do it," says Harriett. She taps on the window and gestures for Maraud to pull over.

He pulls off to the side of the road, shuts off the engine, and gets out of the truck. "What's up?"

"We were misinformed," Harriett says.

Maraud's eyes narrow.

"We need to travel north."

"Just came from the north."

"I understand. Now we need to return that way."

"You screwing with me?"

"No, sir."

I hold up my phone. "We were told that the target is on the move. Unfortunately, when you're trying to kill somebody, you can't be sure that they're going to stay put and wait for you."

"Where is he now?"

"North. That's all we know."

"When will you know more?"

"After we go north."

"Not in the mood for games."

"Your share is a quarter million dollars," I say. "You can't be bothered to drive around some more for that kind of money? If you want to bail, we'll get out of your truck right now."

"You get that I don't believe your full story, right?" Maraud asks. "You're professional assassins like I'm a ballerina. Way more to this."

"Either way," I say, "we need to go back north, and we're not sure where we're going to end up. If you're cool with that, keep driving. If not, we'll leave."

Maraud glares at me, Seth, and Harriett in turn. "Fine," he says. "If I find out I'm being played, I'm going to rip off one of your heads, and use that head to bash in your other two heads."

"Noted," I say.

"Question for you," says Seth. "Is the phrase 'warm fuzzy feeling' homophobic?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I feel like it is, but I can't explain why."

"I don't even know how that would work. Don't talk to me any more. In fact, don't talk to them, either. They may pretend they can stand it but they can't."

Maraud gives us each one more glare, then gets back in the truck.

"No pressure," I tell Harriett, "but it would be *really* nice if we found Rapport soon."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next couple of hours pass very slowly. When you've been beaten to a pulp the previous night, sitting in the back of a rickety pickup truck all day doesn't feel good on any part of your body. Every once in a while, Maraud looks back and gives us a hateful glare to make sure we don't forget that he's unhappy with us.

The next couple of hours pass even more slowly. If I had a comfy blanket, pillow, and mattress back here, I could make good use of the time by getting some sleep, but it's a challenge to rest when your sore body is constantly vibrating. Instead, we all just kind of sit there, staring at the Arizona scenery. It's beautiful for sure, but it's also not exactly one new wonder after another.

"Maybe we should be filling the back of the truck with saguaro cactus," says Seth. "If we hurl those things at the Cyclops, he'll go down pretty quick, I bet."

"Do you really want Maraud to come to a sudden stop when we're in the back of a truck filled with cacti?"

"I guess you're right."

"I think it's illegal to mess with them, anyway."

"Why? They're everywhere. It's not like they're endangered."

"I don't know. I never researched saguaro cactus regulations."

"All I'm saying is that if we set up some kind of catapult, and flung a big batch of those things, a Cyclops would be in for some hurting."

I start to respond, and then I think, yeah, actually, catapulting a shitload of cacti *would* be a highly effective way to dispatch a Cyclops. If I make an obnoxious comment, I'll just end up looking stupid when that turns out to be the ultimate solution to our problem.

We're almost to the Utah border. As long as we're in Arizona, we're still sticking to the original plan, and I'm not *too* worried that we'll be driving around for months. If we cross into a new state, then we may need to part ways with Maraud, to improve the odds that he doesn't remove limbs from each of us.

If he *lets* us part ways. He still kind-of-sort-of-maybe believes that he's got \$250,000 on the line.

"There!" says Harriett, as we pass a highway exit. "That's where we should have turned."

I knock on the window. "Get off at the next exit," I tell Maraud.

A few miles later, he pulls off at the next exit. When he stops, I explain that we should have gotten off at the previous exit, so we need to turn around and go back.

Maraud glares at me.

"Maybe Harriett should sit up front," I say.

"No. Don't trust any of you anymore."

We get back on the highway. I can occasionally see Maraud glaring at us in the rear-view mirror. We arrive at the exit, and Maraud pulls off. He stops at a red light, looks back, and gives us a questioning look.

I shrug.

He continues driving. We're in a very small town called Rustin. There are plenty of places to turn, but Maraud sticks to the main street. At every stoplight, he looks back at us, and I give him a shrug.

"He seems unhappy," says Harriett.

"He'll be okay," I say. "Even though, technically, there's no money, and he's been driving us all day because of a big lie. I'm sure it will all work out perfectly fine with no hard feelings."

"There!" says Harriett, as we pass Penny Avenue. "That's where we should have turned."

I rap on the window and convey this information to Maraud.

"Any chance you could get the prophecy to kick in a few seconds sooner?" I ask.

"I have no control over it."

Maraud does a U-turn at the next intersection, and turns onto Penny Avenue. We pass a couple of restaurants before it becomes a residential area. Some kids playing kickball in the street move out of the way as we approach and wave to us as we pass, even though we're so bruised up and unwashed that our appearance should frighten children.

"We should have turned there," says Harriett, as we pass an unpaved road.

"Why do I have to keep telling him?" I ask.

Harriett knocks on the window. "That road," she says, pointing behind us.

If it were possible for a stream of fire to jettison from somebody's eyes, the look Maraud gives Harriett would be when it happened. But, still, he turns around and then turns onto the unnamed street.

Riding in the back of the truck sucked before, but it's significantly worse now that we're on a dirt road. We hit bump after bump after bump. Not to mention that the sun is beginning to set, so we're about to have an added element of nighttime spookiness.

The houses we pass get further and further apart. With every



minute, the odds that we won't be attacked by cannibalistic mutants seem to decrease. I'll give Maraud points for bravery; I sure as hell wouldn't be driving out here after dark with three strangers with uncertain motives.

The road curves a lot, and is becoming quite a bit less road-like. Harriett and Seth aren't whimpering in fear, so I'm not going to either, but, jeez, this is unnerving. We hit a bump that practically knocks me over.

Soon, there are no signs of civilization, no illumination except the truck's headlights, and we have to hold on tight to keep from bouncing around like popcorn.

I keep asking Harriett if she genuinely thinks we're still headed in the right direction, and she insists that we are. I have no idea how far we've gone. Five or six miles, maybe? This is insane. This can't possibly be the way to an actual town, unless the town consists of a small shack where an inbred family whittles knives made out of human bones.

Oh, yeah, we haven't had cell phone reception since we left the paved road.

Finally, there's a huge dip in the road that almost sends me crashing into Harriett. The truck makes a noise that I can't quite identify but is definitely not something you want to hear out in the middle of nowhere after dark, and then the truck comes to a stop.

Maraud gets out. If I could see his face clearly, I assume he'd look mad.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Broke the truck."

He reaches into the back and picks up a large flashlight. I lean over the side to watch him crouch down and shine the beam underneath the vehicle. He stands back up.

"So...?" I ask.

"Just what I said. Truck's broken."

"How broken?"

"Not a mechanic. Big piece on the bottom is broken."

"The axle?"

"Sounds right."

"We can't fix a broken axle by ourselves!"

"Nope."

"You seem weirdly calm about this."

Maraud nods. "That's because, if I let it sink in, I'll go on a killing spree. Right now I'm taking deep breaths and thinking about things that make me happy. Horseradish sauce. Bowling."

"I promise we were going the right way," says Harriett.

"Do you have any idea how much further?" I ask.

"Sadly, no. I suppose we have two options. We can stop for the night and sleep in Maraud's truck—"

"The *back* of my truck," Maraud clarifies.

"Or we can leave the deceased vehicle behind and forge onward."

"Not forging anywhere if we don't know where we're going," says Maraud. "Want to sleep in the back, fine with me, but the only direction we're walking is back the way we came."

"Snakes can't slither up the side of a truck, can they?" Seth asks.

"Maraud is right," I say, ignoring what I hope was a really stupid question from Seth. "I hate to backtrack, but at least that way we know we can get a signal and call for help. Otherwise, we could be walking through the forest for days."

"I can forage for food," Harriett assures us.

"Should we put it to a vote?" I ask.

"No," says Maraud. "I call the shots. I say we're not going to go forward on foot unless *I* know what's ahead."

"You were not elected our leader," Harriett says.

"Want to fight me for it?"

I kind of want to see this battle.

No. No, I don't. We should not be fighting amongst ourselves, no matter how entertaining it would be to see Harriett take out Maraud.

"Everybody calm down," I say. "Harriett, I'm sure that you would be perfectly fine if we had to walk for a few days, but at least two of the rest of us would die. We're not equipped for this. We don't all have to go, but somebody needs to call a tow truck."

"All right," says Harriett. "But I'd like to go now instead of waiting until morning."

"I agree," says Maraud.

"Should somebody stay with the truck?" asks Seth.

"Yes," says Maraud. "Appreciate it if you defended it from the truck-slithering snakes."

Seth says nothing.

We push the truck off to the side of what little exists of the road, and then the four of us start walking back the way we came. I wish we had more than one flashlight between us. There's way more darkness surrounding us than I'd prefer.

"There's really no upside to having met you," says Maraud.

"I feel differently," says Harriett. "If there are terrors in the night, I believe that our combined might can defeat them."

"You're paying to get my truck fixed, you know."

"No, we're not," I tell him. "You should've driven slower."

Maraud shines the flashlight beam directly into my face. "You saying this is my fault?"

"Could you please keep the light in front of us?" asks Seth. "I'm

trying to monitor the snake situation."

"Too cold for snakes after dark," says Maraud.

"Forgive me if I don't trust your snake credentials."

"Want me to carry you on my back?"

"No, I want you to keep the light shined on where we're walking.

I'm not trying to be cowardly; I'm just saying that stepping on a poisonous snake in the dark is something that can be avoided if we watch where we're going. Also, if the road is so bad that it broke your truck, it would be nice to not step in a giant hole."

Maraud shines the beam back in front of us.

"Was that a tarantula on that tree?" Seth asks.

"Doubt it."

"Swish the light back over there."

We stop walking and Maraud shines the beam around some trees.

"Back one," says Seth. "Yeah, right there. See it?"

I look closely. It does indeed appear to be a tarantula.

"They aren't venomous," says Maraud.

"Oh, well, then let's just go get it and drop it down the back of your shirt."

We resume our walk.

"Graspin the Colossal wouldn't be afraid of spiders," I say.

"Graspin the Colossal kills giant spiders left and right," says Seth.

"He can also turn invisible and eat an entire wild boar in one sitting. Too bad he's a fictional character. Anyway, I didn't specifically say that I was scared of the tarantula. I just thought we should all be aware that we're in a tarantula-laden environment."

"It's good information to possess," says Harriett. "Could we perhaps pause for a moment so I can break off a large branch to carry?"

I don't want to drain my cell phone battery, so I only check for a signal every ten minutes. The fourth time I check, there's still nothing. This is better than being in a to-the-death cage match, I suppose, but everybody's morale is low.

"What was that?" asks Seth, looking to the side.

"A tarantula-snake hybrid?" asks Maraud.

"You didn't hear that?"

"Slithering and scurrying of tiny spider feet?"

"Stop being a jerk. Just listen."

We all stop and listen.

"Oh, shit," says Maraud.

"See? You act like I'm some big baby, but apparently I'm the only one paying attention to our surroundings."

"Shhhh," I say. "Do you hear one growl or two?"

"I hear three," says Seth.

The growls are coming from in front of us. Maraud shines his

flashlight all around the road ahead, stopping at the coyote near the side of the road that's, at most, a hundred feet away.

"Everybody stay calm," says Maraud. "He's as scared of us as we are of him."

The coyote steps onto the road. It's immediately joined by two more. They certainly don't *look* like they're as scared of us as we are of them.

They all look hungry. We can see their ribs.

Harriett raises her branch into a defensive position.

The coyotes begin to walk toward us.

"How many you think you can take?" Maraud asks Harriett.

"If they suddenly charge at us, two."

Two more hungry looking coyotes step out onto the road. All five of them are growling. Nobody says it out loud, but I'm sure that Harriett, Seth, Maraud, and I are all thinking that we should have waited in the truck until morning.

I put up my fists, which is perhaps the dumbest thing I've ever done. I'm not going to punch out a coyote. Seth, as if bolstered by my ridiculous show of bravery, puts up his own fists as well.

"Why aren't we throwing rocks at them?" Seth asks.

That's actually a much better idea than standing around like idiots. There are rocks all over the place. I pick up a couple of them and fling one at the nearest coyote. I miss on purpose, in hopes that I'll scare them away without enraging them. The coyotes don't seem intimidated.

I throw a second rock. This one strikes the nearest coyote in the side. It lets out a loud yelp that hurts my heart a little bit, because I love all animals, even carnivorous ones that want to rip off thick strips of my flesh. But despite the yip, the coyote doesn't run away. I guess they're all too hungry. They continue their approach.

Maraud hands me the flashlight, then turns to Seth. "Piss me off!"

"Say what?"

"Piss me off! Make me mad!"

"How?"

"Figure something out!"

"You suck!" says Seth.

"Are you kidding?"

I scoop up a couple more rocks with my free hand.

"You're ugly," says Seth, "and your hair is out of control, and your breath smells like you've been gargling skunk juice, and the problem with the truck was completely your fault, because you suck."

"Say something anti-gay."

"No, I don't think so."

I'm having difficulty keeping track of all five coyotes with the

flashlight beam. I may have caught a glimpse of a sixth further up the road. If you asked me if I thought I'd be more scared than the time a guy tried to slash my throat with a pocketknife, I would've said, "Well, maybe, but not the same week."

"You want to die?" Maraud asks. "Make me mad!"

Seth kicks Maraud in the nuts.

Maraud falls to his knees, clutching his groin in agony. From his expression, I am 99.9% sure that this is not what he meant...but, admittedly, he does look pretty angry.

The first coyote rushes us. Harriett whacks it with the stick before it can bite a chunk out of anybody's leg. I still feel bad when it yips.

If they attack us one by one, we might be okay.

The remaining four coyotes attack.

Maraud gets back up far more quickly than I ever would in a crotch-kick situation, and it's immediately clear that he is in full-on Maraud the Berserker mode.

Harriett smacks another coyote.

A coyote lunges at Maraud. He lets out a battle cry of such intensity that it threatens to start an earthquake, then kicks the poor thing in the face. He dives forward, grabs the coyote by its hind legs, lifts it into the air, then swings its body, using it to bash two of the others.

I'm absolutely terrified that I'm seconds from death, but time seems to stop as I process this. He *grabbed the coyote by its hind legs*, and then he *lifted it into the freaking air*, after which he *swung its body*, using it to *bash two of the other starving coyotes that were trying to kill us*.

I cannot say "Holy shit" enough times to sufficiently express my feelings. There are not enough holy shits in the world.

Even Harriett, who is *fending off ravenous coyotes with a tree branch*, seems stunned.

I fling another one of the rocks, feeling like a four-year-old who gets to pour the can of pumpkin pie mix into the crust and thinks he's actually helping make Thanksgiving dinner.

The two coyotes that got struck with their fellow canine take off running. Maraud lets out another battle cry, and I really am surprised that the earth doesn't crack beneath his feet.

One of the coyotes knocks down Seth. He cries out in terror. Maraud hurls his coyote, which is having a terrible night, at that one. They collide, yip, and run off.

Harriett gives the last coyote a whack on the backside, and it, too, runs off. As I shine the flashlight beam ahead, I see that there was indeed a sixth one, but it has apparently decided to flee with the rest of them.

I can't believe it. We—and by "we" I mean Harriett and Maraud—defended ourselves from a pack of coyotes! Who does that? I'm still dubious about the Cyclops, but if there *is* a Cyclops, we're going to kick its ass! We didn't even get...

No, wait. Maraud has a bite on his arm. Not a bad one, but still, it's a coyote bite.

I extend my hand to Seth. He takes it, and sheepishly allows me to help him to his feet. The front of his shirt has a couple of long rips in it, but I can't tell if anything broke the skin.

Maraud lets out yet another battle cry, then, using his injured arm, punches Seth in the face.

"Don't you *ever* kick me in the balls again!" he shouts.

Maraud jumps up and down, howling in rage. Harriett and I carefully back away. Seth, who has returned to his spot on the ground, also scoots away.

After about thirty seconds of the most extreme temper tantrum I've ever witnessed, Maraud stops jumping and starts taking deep breaths.

"I'm all right," he finally says.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yep."

"You told me to make you mad!" Seth wails. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"Could've pulled my hair."

"You might've liked it!"

"No, you're right, you're right," says Maraud. "Did what needed to be done." He looks at his bleeding arm and winces. "Wish I'd brought the first aid kit from my truck."

"I was our strongest proponent of not waiting in the truck until morning," says Harriett. "However, I have revised that opinion."

I take out my cell phone and check for a signal. Nothing. "Yeah, let's head back," I say. "Hey, Maraud, is it okay for me to help Seth up, or are you planning to punch him again?"

"Help him up."

"I can help myself up," says Seth, getting to his feet. "I was gonna tell you how awesome you were in that fight, but you had to go and ruin it." He turns to Harriett. "*You* were awesome, though."

"We all contributed in our own way."

"Yes," says Seth. "I cleverly distracted one of them by letting it chew on my chest."

"Didn't run screaming like a coward," says Maraud. "That's the important part."

"I suppose. Are you going to bleed to death?"

"Not before we get back to the truck."

"Then let's go before another ninety of them come after us. There could be a coyote behind every tree. Clearly we don't know how nature works out here."

We begin to walk back to the truck, not moving as quickly as we were before. I wish I'd made a video of this encounter. It would've gotten tens of millions of YouTube hits. I definitely could've monetized that.

"What was that?" asks Seth, looking back.

"A tarantula-snake-coyote hybrid?" asks Maraud.

"I'm glad you're feeling well enough to make jokes. It's not like I wasn't the first one to hear the wild animals that just attacked us."

"Defense mechanism. I feel terrible."

"Shhhh," I say. "Everybody just listen."

We're all quiet for a moment.

"It's a car," I say.

It's definitely a car engine. Are we rescued? We may be rescued, unless the car is on a different road, or the driver tries to run us down for injuring the members of his vicious coyote army. *"You done went and hurt Bitey, Scratcher, Mangler, Devourer, and Flesh Remover! Prepare to diiiiiiie!"*

We wait.

The car is on this road for sure, so at least we don't have to run through the predator-laden woods to try to intercept it.

We can see the headlights.

The car comes around the bend. We can't really see anything but the lights, but we all wave for the driver's attention, as if the driver could somehow miss four people standing on a tiny dirt road in the middle of nowhere.

The car stops.

I can hear the windows rolling down. I shine the flashlight beam into the front windshield—which is rude, I know—and see Reggie behind the wheel. He's still wearing his eye patch.

I shout for the others to run, as Reggie and at least one of his partners get out of the vehicle and start shooting at us.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We flee as quickly as we can. As I run, I turn off the flashlight to make it harder for them to see us.

"Who the hell are those guys?" asks Maraud.

"I'll tell you later," I say, figuring that this is not the best time for exposition.

They shoot several more times. None of us cry out and drop to the ground, which I would like to believe is because the bad guys are purposely not trying to hit us, but is probably because they just haven't hit us yet.

We hurry off the road. I'm not a big fan of the idea of running through the woods in total darkness, but what else are we going to do? I wonder if this means that we'll get lost and simply die more gradually.

"We have to slow down," says Harriett. "We can't risk injury."

She's right. Somebody, most likely me or Seth, is going to trip, break a leg, and force the others into the unpleasant decision about whether or not to leave him behind to meet his demise. We cease our all-out sprint and shift to a really fast walk.

"Got a rifle in my truck," says Maraud.

"Why didn't you bring it?" I ask.

"We were searching for help. People don't help you when you're carrying a big-ass rifle."

"All right, back to the truck. Good plan."

I hear some doors slam. I risk a look backwards and see the car moving.

"Hey," I say, "let's stick to the road. They're driving after us, but they'll have to drive slow, so I think we can outrun them!"

We return to our full sprint and run back onto the dirt road. It curves slightly to the left, so after we're out of sight, I turn on the flashlight and shine it on the ground in front of us.

"Try to keep up," Harriett says to Maraud, who has fallen behind a couple of steps.

"I'm a fighter, not a runner!" he tells her, sounding out of breath already. "And I'm tired from saving us from the goddamn coyotes!"

"I did my part."



"Not saying that you didn't help, but I definitely—"

"Conversation for later!" I say.

Even with Maraud not quite keeping the pace, we are indeed outrunning Reggie's car. My hope was that he'd floor the gas pedal and break something important, but he seems to be driving at a safe speed.

I hope I live long enough to have time to be sufficiently flabbergasted by Reggie's return to our lives. How the hell did he find us out here? We're not even in my car anymore!

Questions for another time...

It's extremely difficult to try to illuminate the ground for all four of us. I'm focusing more on the others than myself, which I suppose is why my left foot comes down on a big jagged rock and I pitch forward, landing on my face and dropping the flashlight.

Seth scoops it up as it rolls away. Harriett pulls me to my feet. I don't think this is any worse than the other injuries I've accumulated on this trip, so I'm able to quickly resume the run without dooming everybody else.

I mentally prepare myself for the sight of a dozen deadly coyotes waiting in the middle of the road, because that's where this night seems to be headed. But after a few minutes of sprinting, during which we lose Reggie's car completely, I can see Maraud's truck up ahead.

As always, I don't have a strategy for what to do next. It's great that Maraud has a rifle, but Reggie and his companions have at least two guns, so unless Maraud is an expert shot, we're still in bad shape.

"Are you a good shot?" I ask Maraud, as he unlocks his truck door.

"Not really. You?"

"I've never shot a rifle."

"Harriett?" Maraud asks.

"I'm only skilled with close-up weapons."

"Seth?"

"I can try."

"Will you succeed?"

"I can't make any promises."

Maraud takes a rifle out from behind the seat and hands it to Seth. "Hide in the back of the truck. Wait for them to stop the car. When they do, start shooting."

Seth gives him a nervous nod then climbs into the back of the truck. "You take that side," Maraud tells Harriett, pointing to the woods on the other side of the road. "I'll take this side. Attack when it feels right." He looks at me. "Want to be bait?"

"Not really."

"You sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Then go with Harriett."

Harriett and I hurry into the woods and crouch down. A moment later, we see the headlights of Reggie's car.

"This is a terrible plan," I whisper.

"I don't believe it qualifies as an actual plan."

"Are you sure we shouldn't just keep running? That seemed to be working pretty well."

"Our pursuers need to be dealt with. We can't have them distracting us while we're trying to slay the Cyclops."

Reggie's car continues to approach. He has to know that this is a makeshift trap, right? He's a pretty bad bounty hunter, but he's not stupid.

About fifty feet away from the back of the truck, the car stops.

The passenger door opens, and Pulp gets out. I'm glad that there's no sign of the guy who went over the rail, which would be very disconcerting.

"We only want the girl," Pulp calls out. "Turn her over to us and we'll leave the rest of you alone."

"I doubt he's being truthful," Harriett whispers.

"You have ten seconds to send her out. If she's not out here by the time I finish counting, all of you are dead. Ten...nine...eight..."

"I think you should stay put," I tell Harriett.

"I appreciate that," she says.

"Seven...six...five..."

The car's headlights illuminate the back of the truck enough that I can see that the barrel of the rifle is *not* protruding over the side. This seems like it would be a good time for Seth to open fire.

"Four...three...two..."

Pulp didn't clarify exactly what was going to happen at "one." Is he going to start shooting into the darkness? Is Reggie going to join him? Or is it just the point where they resume trying to find us?

"One!"

Pulp just stands there.

"I said, if you don't send out the girl in ten seconds, all of you are dead."

He continues to stand there. This countdown was kind of anticlimactic.

I see the barrel of the rifle poke over the tailgate. An instant later, Seth pulls the trigger. He's keeping himself hidden, so his aim is crap and he doesn't hit anything, but Pulp hurries forward, gun raised.

Harriett rushes out of our hiding spot to intercept him.

Pulp swings his gun toward her, but takes a branch to the arm before he can fire.

Seth, who cannot see what's happening in front of him, shoots again.

Pulp cries out and clutches his upper thigh.

Maraud hurries onto the road.

The driver's side door swings open. Reggie gets out, using the door for cover.

Seth fires again, shattering the front windshield.

"Stop shooting randomly!" I shout.

Harriett whacks Pulp in the forehead with the branch, then twists him around to put him between her and Reggie. Pulp isn't a perfect human shield by any stretch of the imagination, so somebody is going to have to take out Reggie.

Seth's head pops into view. He points the rifle at Reggie's hiding spot and fires, hitting the door. I can't tell if the bullet passed through. Probably not. I don't think a bullet can pass all the way through a car door, though it's not something I've ever researched.

Pulp tumbles to the ground, robbing Harriett of her human shield.

I'm not really a "create a diversion to draw gunfire to myself" kind of guy, but Harriett is fully exposed, and I've at least got some tree cover. So I start running through the brush, shouting "Hey! Hey! Over here!", hoping that this doesn't get me a bullet to the gut.

A bullet whizzes past my face, and I wonder why the hell I did that.

Seth fires again, shattering the car door window. He's actually a pretty good shot, assuming he did that on purpose.

Reggie takes another shot at me. I suppose I've accomplished my goal, but *shit!*

Maraud has gone around the back of Reggie's car, and now he's creeping up behind him. If Reggie hears him, it won't be difficult to deliver a point-blank bullet to Maraud's forehead.

Harriett scoops up Pulp's gun and tosses it into the woods toward me, then she runs to the opposite side of the car to decrease the chances that Reggie will shoot her.

Reggie looks back.

And then Maraud gets him in a headlock and pulls him to his feet.

"Drop your gun," Maraud tells him.

Reggie obliges.

We seem to be safe now. I pick up the gun while Harriett walks back over to where Pulp is lying on the ground. She holds the branch over his head, to indicate that it would be in his best interest to remain there and not make a lot of fuss.

"This the Cyclops?" Maraud asks me.

"Yes," I say, stepping back onto the road. "Great work."

Maraud twists Reggie's neck. There's an audible *snap*, and then

Reggie's whole body goes limp. Maraud lets go of him and he drops to the ground.

"Uhhhhh..." I say.

Maraud brushes his hands off on his pants. "Job done."

I'm not sure if I should have seen that coming or not. If I'd known he was just going to break Reggie's neck, I would have given a different answer. I sort of assumed that we'd discuss the situation first.

"I...um, I...um..." I'm having trouble using words.

Seth climbs out of the back of the truck. "Oh my God! I've never seen somebody get their neck broken. That's gonna haunt me forever. And it wasn't even gory." He leans the rifle against the truck, puts his hand over his mouth, and tries not to throw up.

"I wish you hadn't done that," I tell Maraud.

"Why? You were hired to kill him, right? Why give him the chance to outsmart us and escape?"

"We had some questions for him."

Maraud points to Pulp. "He's not dead. Question him."

Pulp curls into the fetal position.

Seth coughs a couple of times but doesn't vomit. "Did you hear the snap? It was horrible. It sounded like twisting a piece of celery in half, except way worse."

"You shot the other guy in the leg," says Maraud. "Look at all the blood. If you're going to be sick, be sick over your own violence, not mine."

Seth slaps his hand back over his mouth.

Feeling more than a bit stunned, I walk over to Pulp. I point the gun at him, and he pulls himself into an even tighter ball.

"Who are you?" I ask.

Pulp squeezes his eyes closed and says nothing. Harriett smacks him on the ear with the tip of the branch. "He asked you a question."

"I'm Jerry," he says, not opening his eyes. "Jerry White."

"Why are you following us?"

Jerry, who I still think of as Pulp, doesn't answer. Harriett smacks him in the ear again.

"I don't know anything," he insists.

"You've got to know *something*," I tell him. "How did you follow us all this way?"

"Reggie knew where to go."

"How did he know?"

"I don't know."

"Did he have a tracking device? What?"

"He just knew! He didn't explain. I'm only here for the paycheck, I swear."

"Were you working for Harriett's parents?"

"No. He had them on his phone as a fake contact. You shouldn't have fallen for that."

"What happened to the other guy?"

"He died. At least, I assume he did after we buried him."

I decide not to delve further into that particular comment. "You spent at least four days riding around with him. You can't tell me that you don't know anything else."

"I don't. He wasn't talky."

"Give me something to work with or I'll shoot you in the other leg."

Pulp chokes back a sob. "I can't tell you anything. Do what you've got to do."

I am, of course, not really going to shoot him. "What I mean is that my friend will jam her thumb in the bullet hole. Is that what you want? You want her to jam her thumb into your wound and jiggle her finger around? How do you think that will feel?"

"That is not something I'd be inclined to do," says Harriett. I wish she were better at deception.

"Oh, that really sucks for you," I tell Pulp. "Even though she's a trained deadly warrior, she has the smallest fingers of all of us." I point to Seth. "So it's Graspin the Colossal who will be messing with your gunshot wound. What do you think about that?"

"His name's not really Graspin the Colossal," says Pulp.

"As far as you're concerned, it is."

"What is he, six?"

"Just to clarify," says Seth, "I don't go around calling myself Graspin the Colossal. I'm totally aware of the difference between my real self and the character I use for role-playing games."

Maraud walks over and crouches down over Pulp. "How about I tear his jaw off for you?"

"Well, no, we're trying to get him to talk."

"Maybe just his lips, then."

"Can you talk without your lips?" I ask Maraud.

"Not perfectly, but, sure, why not?"

"Have you ever torn off somebody's lips and then talked to them afterward?"

"No," says Maraud. "I suppose I haven't."

He punches the bullet wound. Pulp lets out a shriek of pain that, if this were a movie, would be followed by an image of hundreds of startled birds flying out of the trees.

I want to apologize to Pulp, but no, that's the opposite of what I should be doing. "Tell us why you want Harriett, or he'll do that again," I say.

"I don't know anything!"

Maraud smacks the wound again.

Pulp howls. He's either going to scare away every coyote in the woods, or bring them here, seeking easy prey.

"You should probably quit doing that," says Seth. "If you keep hurting him, he's going to give you fake answers just to make you stop."

"I know when people are lying to me," says Maraud. He's here with us because of one big whopper of a lie that we told him, but that's a revelation for later.

Pulp wipes some snot onto his sleeve. "I don't know anything. You have to believe me. If I knew anything, I would have told you the first time you hit my leg. I wouldn't have made you do it twice, I swear."

Maraud reaches out to me. "Give me the gun."

I'm not sure I should do this. I don't want him to blow Pulp's head off.

"I said, give me the gun."

"I probably shouldn't."

Maraud lets out a huff of disbelief. "Do you people have *any* clue how to intimidate somebody? Why don't we just offer him some hot tea and a blankey? Jesus."

"Sorry."

"Whatever. Don't care if he talks or not. Just trying to help you guys out. If you need me, I'll be in the truck, patching up my gashes."

Maraud climbs into the truck and slams the door.

"Let me go," says Pulp. "I won't say anything about what you did to Reggie, I promise."

"We're not the ones who need to worry about police involvement," I say. "You tried to slash my throat."

"Point taken. I did do that." Pulp sighs, then nods toward Seth. "He's right, though. If you keep torturing me, I'll just make something up."

Seth picks up the rifle. "You know what, I've had enough of this garbage." He presses the barrel of the gun between Pulp's eyes. "*Tell us what we want to know, or I will end you!*" he screams. "*Do you understand? I will turn your head into red mist!*"

"I don't know anything!" says Pulp, now in tears. "I'm telling the truth! It was all Reggie! I don't know anything! I don't know anything!"

Seth lowers the rifle. "I think it's safe to say that he doesn't know anything."

"So what do we do with him?" I ask.

"Leave him to be devoured by wild animals?"

"Look, I know you're going to take the car," says Pulp. "Throw me in the trunk, drive back to the main road, and then toss me off to the

side. I'll take care of myself from there. Please, show some mercy."

"The same mercy you showed your friend when you buried him alive?" I ask.

"He wasn't going to make it. I've got plenty of good years left."

"We have several options," says Harriett. "Cold-blooded murder, abandonment here, abandonment in a more civilized area, further pain-based incentive to provide additional information, or we can take him with us for the remainder of our journey."

"We're not going to kill him," I say. "And we're sure as hell not taking him with us except maybe to dump him off somewhere. I believe him when he says he doesn't know anything. I don't mind leaving him here for the coyotes if everybody else is cool with it, but my official vote is to bring him back to the main road."

"I agree," says Harriett.

"We could take him to the police," says Seth.

"That would cause a significant delay," says Harriett. "And I very much doubt Maraud would consider that an acceptable option, since he took a human life."

"Yeah, I guess not."

"All in favor of throwing him in the trunk and dumping him on the main road, raise your hand," I say.

Harriett, Seth, and Pulp raise their hands.

"You don't get a vote and you know it," I tell Pulp. "But it doesn't matter, because I'm in favor of that too. I'll tell Maraud."

I open the truck door. Maraud is taping gauze to his arm.

"Yeah?" he asks.

"We're going to drop him off."

"All right. Give me a minute."

While Maraud finishes with his own first aid, Harriett and I drag Pulp to the back of Reggie's car. Seth climbs into the front seat and pops the trunk lid.

The trunk is completely empty. I don't know anybody who keeps a completely empty car trunk, so presumably Harriett was supposed to go in there.

Maraud gets out of the truck and walks over to us. "Take his legs," he tells me.

I grab Pulp's legs. Maraud crouches down next to him, then suddenly gives Pulp's head a violent twist, snapping his neck.

We all gape at Maraud.

"What?" he asks. "You were seriously going to let this maniac hitch a ride? Possibly with a family with little kids? That's nuts. You're lucky to have me as your moral compass."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

It's official: I'm now the kind of person who drags dead bodies out into the woods and buries them in a shallow grave. Didn't see that coming.

Seth and I both are taking a "maybe this isn't so cool" attitude toward the whole situation, but Harriett and Maraud seem perfectly fine with it. I do have to admit that if I'd later heard about Pulp going on some kind of killing spree, I would've felt personally responsible, so I guess it's for the best that Maraud made the tough decision for us.

During the burial process, Maraud doesn't say anything about keeping Reggie's body, or even taking pictures of it, as proof that our assassination was successful. I'm pretty sure he knows that it was bullshit. I'm surprised he hasn't brought it up yet, but I'm not going to be the one to instigate that conversation. It'll happen.

Yes, we search their corpses. They're both carrying wallets, and their Florida driver's licenses indicate that their names are Reginald Waters and Jerry White, so they weren't lying about that. Reggie isn't wearing an eye patch in his photo. I don't know what to read into that. Between them, they've got sixty-two dollars, which we take, along with their credit cards. Jerry is an organ donor, so I feel bad about that.

We bury their bodies separately from their wallets, to make them harder to identify if they're discovered.

After the dark deed is done, Maraud and Seth head off in separate directions to pee. Harriett and I return to the truck and sit down on the ground next to it.

"You seem distressed," Harriett observes.

"Yeah."

"They weren't high quality human beings."

"I know."

"If I'd been consulted in the matter, I wouldn't have broken their necks, but now that it's done, you have to agree that we're safer."

"We still don't know why they were after you."

"You're right. We don't."

"Any ideas?"

Harriett considers that for a moment. "I am drawn toward



stopping the Cyclops, as are Graspin and Maraud. There must be an opposing force. Perhaps Reggie was drawn toward his own destiny to slay me to protect the creature. I am not happy about this. At least they're dead now."

"Let's pretend, for argument's sake, that I don't believe in the Cyclops. In a hypothetical world where the Cyclops doesn't exist, why would you think they were trying to catch you?"

"I can't think of any possible motive."

"You have to have *some* idea."

"I grew up with virtually no social interaction. I'm off to slay what you believe to be a myth. Why would anybody be desperate to stop me?"

"I don't know, and it's freaking me out."

Maraud steps out of the woods. "When do we talk about my share of the seven hundred and fifty thousand bucks?" he asks.

I stand up. "Look, we—"

"You saying there's no seven hundred and fifty thousand bucks?"

"We just—"

"You saying that you've been lying to me?"

"We—"

"Pretty much figured that from the beginning. It was a stupid story. Not as stupid as the Cyclops story, but stupid."

"So why are you with us?"

Maraud shrugs. "Dunno. Trying to sort that out."

"Well, for what it's worth, we're glad you're here."

"Yeah, whatever." He glances around. "Where's Seth?"

Where is Seth? He always peed quickly. He should've been back before Maraud, who has a much larger bladder.

Seth steps out of the woods. Three seconds of worry for nothing.

\*

Seth drives Reggie's car, while Maraud sits in the passenger seat, which is scooted all the way back. Harriett has the misfortune of sitting behind him, while I get the relative comfort of sitting behind Seth. It should be noted that I offered to take Harriett's spot, but she declined, explaining that her body was the smallest of the group. The fact that her body contains ten times more fierce power per square inch than mine is irrelevant in terms of needing legroom.

He's driving very, very slowly. Though every time he goes over a particularly large bump, we the passengers loudly inform him that he's going too fast.

I've got my cell phone out and I'm watching the screen. Any moment now...any moment now...

"Got a signal!" I announce. I call AAA, describe the truck's location as best I can, and am told that they'll have a tow truck there within an hour. But since we've got Reggie's car, which I assume nobody will be looking for, we can continue our journey while Maraud's truck is in the shop.

I've also got a voice mail from a number I don't recognize. As soon as I hear the voice, I turn the volume up all the way and put it on speaker.

"Evan Portin? This is Jeannie Erickson. You and that red-haired lady were in my gift shop in New Orleans saying some weird shit. I need you to call me as soon as possible. Thanks."

What the hell?

"Oh my goodness," says Harriett.

She called about an hour ago. I immediately call her back. When she answers with "Hello?" she doesn't sound like I woke her up.

"Jeannie?"

"Hey. Where are you?"

"We're in Arizona. By the way, I've got you on speaker," I say, because it's poor form not to let somebody know that they're on speakerphone.

"Since you left my shop, I've been having some weird hallucinations. I was seeing Cyclopes everywhere."

"That can't be pleasant."

"It wasn't. I figured you drugged me or hypnotized me or some sneaky business like that. I almost checked myself into a hospital. But then I started to think, 'Well, what if they were telling the truth?' You know what happened?"

"I'm not sure."

"The hallucinations stopped. I got all peaceful, like I found Jesus. Not that I ever lost Jesus; that's just an example of what it felt like."

Hallucinations, dreams, fantasies...what a myriad of options for learning that your destiny is to slay a Cyclops!

"That's very...I actually don't know how to react to that," I say.

"I've decided to trust my grandson to run the shop on his own. I want to join you."

"We welcome you," says Harriett. "Thank you so much!"

"Wait, hold on," I say. "We've got some safety issues that I need to bring up. It's been crazy. I don't want to send you out here without warning you about the kind of stuff we've been going through. I'm talking about cage fighting and people shooting at us. You know the day we met you? That night I almost got my throat cut. I should list everything that's happened."

"He's right," says Harriett. "It would be irresponsible not to offer full disclosure."

"I'm listening," says Jeannie.

I run down the events, starting with the muggers in the park back in Tampa. It felt like more of them while I was actually living the danger, but still, there have been several instances where I could easily be dead now. I don't want to betray Harriett by dissuading Jeannie from joining us, but I also want to make it clear that there's plenty of peril.

"Thank you for your honesty," says Jeannie. "I'm almost sixty-eight years old and I shouldn't be putting myself through any of those experiences. But I guess none of those things sound as dangerous as fighting a Cyclops."

"That's absolutely true," I say.

"I feel like I need to do this. It makes no sense to me. It won't surprise me if I wake up in the morning and think it was the dumbest idea I've ever had in my life. So I'll make sure that the plane ticket I'm buying as soon as I hang up is refundable."

\*

Our luck is changing. We return to wait by the truck, and the tow truck is there fifteen minutes later. I mean, it's still bad luck from the perspective that Maraud's truck had to be towed away, and the auto repair place obviously won't be open until tomorrow morning, but it's nice that we didn't have to wait very long.

We check into a cheap motel. They only have one room available, but we're all so exhausted that we just say, screw it. Maraud gets one bed, Harriett gets the other, I get the floor, and Seth gets the bathtub.

Maraud snores even louder than Seth.

In the morning, we drive to the auto repair shop, where the manager explains that, yeah, it's bad. And they won't be able to get to it for at least a couple of days.

"Going to compartmentalize this," Maraud tells us as we leave.

"That's what I'm supposed to do. Put it in a little safe in my brain and lock it up tight. We have a working car. We can worry about this later. Not angry. Very calm."

I don't point out that he's twitching.

Jeannie won't arrive until this evening. Harriett doesn't want to move forward until the entire group of heroes has banded together, so we've got a whole day to kill.

"I've got kind of a crazy idea," says Seth. "I have an honest face, so

I think I can use Reggie's credit card without them asking for ID. If you ask me, he owes us some R&R."

\*

Spa treatments have never sounded appealing to me. They were always more of a Becky thing. But as the four of us lay on our individual tables, getting massages, I feel like we're in paradise.

Maraud eschews the facial, manicure, and pedicure, but the rest of us take full advantage of the facilities. We cannot in good conscience go into the hot tub and cloud up the water with our open wounds, but for everything else, price is no object.

"I've never had my skin exfoliated," says Seth. "It's amazing. Feel how smooth my hand is."

I don't mind when he runs his hand over my cheek. It is remarkably smooth.

"I've never been in a robe," says Harriett, taking a sip of her cucumber-flavored water. "This may become my permanent attire."

"Why do we have to go kill the Cyclops?" asks Seth. "Can't we just live here instead?"

"You're right," I say. "I vote we live here. All in favor?"

Everybody raises their hands.

"Then it's settled."

\*

Reggie's credit card finances a delicious four-course dinner. Maraud orders a second steak.

\*

We really should have a bigger car. Unfortunately, we can get away with using Reggie's credit card at a spa or a restaurant, but not at a car rental agency or a hotel, where we'd have to show ID. Maraud says that there's no chance in hell that he's paying for it. Seth says that his credit cards are maxed out. Harriett planned to pay for everything with the cash that got taken away. I'm unemployed, and though I'm

willing to pay for a hotel room when we're on the verge of collapse, I'm not going to pay for a rental car, especially one where the car will probably get damaged. Those sitting in the back seat will just have to get snuggly.

Seth and Maraud wait in the car while Harriett and I go inside to meet Jeannie at baggage claim. She's not there yet, so we watch other passengers collect their suitcases.

"That looks fun," Harriett says.

"Getting your luggage?"

"The moving surface that's transporting the bags. It would be fun to ride on that. I've missed out on so much."

"Oh, well, normal kids don't get to ride on conveyer belts, either, so it's not a gap in your childhood."

"Would they be angry if I sat on it?"

"Yes. It's the airport. They'd be really angry. Don't do it."

"I won't."

Jeannie shows up after a few minutes. She's got a small suitcase on wheels, and is wearing jeans and a yellow t-shirt. I've never seen her walk before, so I'm not happy to see that she's hobbling a bit, but I guess that's more Harriett's concern than mine.

She sees us and smiles. "I apologize for my rudeness last time," she says, when we reach each other.

"It's fine," says Harriett. "That was completely understandable. I said unusual things."

"Do you have any other luggage?" I ask.

Jeannie shakes her head. "You said to pack light. And I didn't want to start off having to deal with lost bags. They lose my bags every time. I mean, every single time." She smiles again, nervously. "This is madness, isn't it?"

"Not at all," says Harriett.

"It is a little," I say. "But it's okay."

"I can't believe I'm doing this. It boggles my mind that I'm here. I don't do things like this."

"Join the club," I say. "So, anyway, Seth is a normal guy. If you've spent any time around geeks, you won't have any problems with him. Maraud is less normal."

"His full name is Maraud the Berserker," says Harriett.

"I see."

"He's big, and he looks scary, and like I said, we watched him kill two men by snapping their necks with his bare hands. But, like I also said, the men were homicidal. Anyway, he'll be sitting up front, so you don't have to worry about him."

"Why am I doing this?" asks Jeannie.

"Destiny," says Harriett.

"Yeah, that must be it."

\*

Jeannie sits in the back with Seth and Harriett while I drive. She texts a lot, and I stop counting the fifteenth time she asks our opinion on whether or not she is insane for doing this.

I've given up trying to figure out scientific explanations for what's going on. I have no clue. All I can do is wait for the moment when we finally discover that there is no Cyclops, and see if an explanation for everybody's behavior surfaces.

We go to a different hotel. Five to a room simply isn't going to work. Jeannie doesn't seem nearly committed enough to the journey to risk putting her through that. Harriett promises again that she will do whatever it takes to pay me back, and in a moment of weakness I decide to spring for five separate rooms. I shouldn't be doing this, but, hey, it's not as if I'm accruing a student loan level of debt.

"I believe that tomorrow's events will be straightforward," says Harriett, as the five of us sit on a couple of couches in the lobby. "We will continue to follow the road until we reach the well. If we're fortunate, which is not guaranteed, our descent and the retrieval of our weapon will be free of incident. I have faith in us."

"We're going down a well?" asks Maraud.

"Yes. You knew that."

"No, I didn't."

"That's right, we told you we were assassins. I assumed you overheard when Evan explained it to Jeannie on the cellular telephone."

"I knew there was a well. I didn't know I'd be going down it. That sounds claustrophobic."

"Everything is optional," says Harriett. "I had one dark moment where I tried to take away Evan's free will, and it was regrettable. It won't happen again."

"How big is this well?" asks Maraud.

"I don't know."

"Will I get stuck?"

"We will make sure that doesn't happen."

"I'm trusting you."

"You know what's weird?" asks Jeannie. "I'm looking forward to this. Isn't that crazy?"

"Hey, I've been having a great time," says Seth. "Not so much while we were getting shot at, and I guess I didn't enjoy the part

where we had to bury those dudes. But excluding those parts, and a couple of other parts, this is awesome. I love you guys."

"Definitely wouldn't say I love you guys," says Maraud. "But considering that you lied to me, cost me my job, and almost got me killed, I don't have that many angry thoughts toward you."

"Thanks, Maraud," I say. "That's sweet."

"Sometimes I'm sweet."

"Well, I can't promise that I'm not going to have second thoughts," says Jeannie. "But for now, I'm all in."

"Should we make up a team name?" asks Seth.

"No," says Maraud.

"Aw, c'mon. It'll boost morale. We should be Harriett and the Cyclops Slayers."

"I don't object to that," says Harriett.

"Or The Cyclops Slayers Five."

"What about The Whack-Nut Quintet?" I ask.

"I've got it," says Seth. "Team Becky! To honor your wife!"

"I'm not comfortable with that."

"We don't have to use that one. It's just an idea. Maybe we could do something with an acronym. What's a good acronym?"

"What words can we form out of JACKASS?" asks Maraud.

"We should probably head off to bed," I say. "Tomorrow's going to be another long day. I mean, long like yesterday. Today was actually really pleasant."

We all head up to our rooms. Seth's room is right next to mine, and I can hear him snoring through the wall. Fortunately, with a pillow over my head, I'm able to sleep.

\*

After Maraud sets the record for most bagels ever eaten at a free continental breakfast, we're back in Reggie's car on the dirt road. I'd rather be the one driving, but Seth is bigger than I am, so in the interest of maximizing space, I'm sitting in the back with Harriett and Jeannie.

Everyone is kind of nervous, so there's not a lot of conversation. Jeannie does breathe a sigh of relief when she gets a text (and accompanying photographic proof) from her grandson confirming that he has indeed opened the shop and is behind the counter.

We reach the spot where Maraud's truck broke down. I feel an uncomfortable chill knowing that there are two dead bodies not too far from here. At least I'm relatively confident that they won't return

as zombies.

We continue driving. The road twists and turns, and twists and turns, and twists and turns...who made this road, anyway? The way it's designed seems more like a deterrent than a way that a road might naturally happen, unless the plowing was done by a horse that had gone mad.

"Not trying to weird anybody out," says Seth, "but don't you think we should have crossed our own path at some point?"

"Huh?" asks Maraud.

"It feels like we're going in circles, but the road would have to cross over itself."

"No," says Jeannie. "I've been paying close attention. It's loopy as hell but the geometry still makes sense."

"Okay," says Seth. "Good to know."

We drive for another hour. We're going really slowly, so we probably haven't gone anywhere near as far as it feels like, but this is one long dirt road. And I agree with Seth that it seems like the road should have crossed over itself at least once, though Jeannie insists that she's very good at making maps in her head, and that we're still fine.

One more hour passes. "This is a positive thing," says Harriett. "If it's this inconvenient, we don't have to worry that somebody else stumbled upon the well by accident."

"That's a good point," I say. "Nobody in their right mind would still be driving on this damn road."

After another ten minutes, the road ends.

Seth stops the car and turns off the engine. "Was it supposed to just end like this?"

"I assume so," says Harriett. "Now we'll have to walk."

"At least it's daylight," says Maraud.

The five of us get out of the car. There's no clear path.

"So, Human GPS," I say to Harriett, "which way?"

"I'm going to say straight ahead."

We walk into the woods. Harriett takes the lead, and Maraud follows right behind her, even though he'd be justified in sitting this one out. Seth, who's carrying the flashlight, brings up the rear.

I have serious concerns about walking around aimlessly for as long as we just drove, but about a hundred yards ahead, we see it. There is indeed a large well in the woods.

It doesn't have a roof or a bucket on a rope. It's just gray bricks in a circle, maybe three feet high. Harriett hurries over to it, and I can't help but be excited, too. We found the well! This is kind of cool.

Harriett reads something inscribed on the bricks. When she turns around, she looks like she's been kicked in the stomach.



She gives me a look that I interpret as "apologetic," which is not the kind of look I want to receive from her.

"This is very upsetting," she says.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She taps on the inscription. "Read it for yourself."

I walk up to the well. The bricks are weather-beaten and look ancient, although admittedly I do not have the expertise to identify the era from which a certain set of bricks originated. The inscription is faded but still legible.

*Send only your disbeliever. All others will perish.*

"This is devastating," says Harriett. "I thought we'd all go together."

"So I'm going to play really, really stupid for a minute," I say.

"What exactly does this mean?"

"It means that, to acquire the weapon, you'd have to descend into the well by yourself."

I nod. "That's what I thought it meant, but I wanted a second opinion."

"I'm sorry, Evan," says Harriett. "I had no idea."

"I'm not real inclined to go down there."

"I understand."

"We have another disbeliever, don't we? Maraud?"

Maraud shakes his head. "I'm skeptical, yeah, but not a disbeliever. Not after those dreams."

"I'm skeptical too," says Jeannie. "But obviously I believe to some degree, or I wouldn't have flown here and left my grandson in charge of my business."

"I'm totally a believer," says Seth. "Otherwise I'd go down there in a heartbeat."

I lean over the side and gaze into the well. There's a rusty metal ladder on the inside that leads down into complete darkness. It does not look inviting.

"Okay, I'm not, I just, I think...um, I'm not...crap."

Harriett looks like she's near tears. "I've said all along that this is optional. Nobody is going to make you do this."

I can tell there's a "but" coming.

"But lives are at stake," she says. "Many lives. And to save them, I'll have to go down there myself."

"It says that you'll perish."

"I know. But I've spent my whole life preparing for this. It's a risk I'll have to take. I can't walk away."

I sigh with frustration. "Okay. Fine. Fine. I will climb down into the dark scary well. You guys won't let anything happen to me, right?"

"Not a chance," says Seth. "We'll give you moral support the entire way, I promise."

"You'll be a hero," Harriett tells me.

"Don't butter me up," I say. "I'd better not die down there."

"I'm confident that you won't."

"If I die, I'm haunting every single one of you," I say. "I'm not sure how to arrange that, but I'll figure that shit out."

I take the flashlight from Seth, turn it on, and shine it down into the well. I can't see the bottom, just a dark void.

I guess I'd assumed that there would be no well, so I hadn't considered whether I would actually go down there. Most likely, I would have volunteered to be the guy to keep watch up above. I'm not remotely convinced that some magical force will kill Harriett if she goes down there instead of me, but it feels awful to let her take the risk.

Does that make me a believer?

No. I just don't want to be an asshole.

It's a well. How dangerous can it be?

I pick up a rock and drop it down. It takes about ten seconds to hear the *clack* as it lands. At least it wasn't a splash. And at least the well isn't bottomless.

"If you hear me scream, I expect somebody to come down and rescue me," I say.

"We will," Harriett promises.

"What exactly am I looking for?"

"I don't know. Some sort of weapon."

"What if it's a nuclear warhead that I can't get back up the ladder?"

"We'll worry about that if it happens."

"All right." I sit on the side of the well and swing my legs over the edge. I take a deep breath to work up my courage, although again, it's just a well. I'm not jogging over a minefield. Everything is going to be simply dandy.

I climb onto the ladder. Feels reasonably secure. There's no immediate indication that it's going to collapse and send me plummeting to my death.

I glare at each of the others in turn, Maraud-style, and then slowly climb down. This isn't so frightening. In fact, it's a grand adventure. How many people get to climb down into an ancient well? I can't

think of a single person that I know who's had this experience. They'll probably be jealous when I tell them about it later, after I don't die.

"You're doing wonderfully," says Harriett.

"I've gone down four rungs."

"You're still doing wonderfully. We adore you."

I continue climbing. After another ten or so rungs, I start to believe my own hype about it not being that scary. It's fine. The ladder is secure, the oxygen level seems fine, and I don't hear any growling around me. No problem. Everything is delightful.

"Excellent job so far, Evan," Harriet calls down. "You are the finest climber I've ever seen."

"You rock, Evan," says Seth.

"Enough," I tell them. "I'll shriek if I need you."

I'm about fifty feet down in the well when I shine the flashlight beam over an engraving that's as large as I am. It depicts a face. A demon face. Horns, an evil fanged smile...all of the things you do not want to see when you're climbing down into a dark well.

The message seems to be: *Hi there! You're descending into Hell!*

The demon face has both of its eyes.

"Is everything all right down there?" asks Harriett. "Are you just taking a rest break? It's perfectly okay if you are."

"There's a demon face," I say. "A terrifying demon face."

"You mean, floating in the air?"

"No. It's carved into the bricks." I'd take a picture of it, but I don't think I can shine the light on the engraving, use my cell phone, and hold the ladder at the same time.

"I don't know what that might be," says Harriett.

"I assume it's just to weed out the chickenshits. I'll keep going."

Warning signs don't get much more explicit than a giant demon head, but I'm a non-believer, right?

I resume the climb. No danger here. Everything is superb. I'm forty-four years old and I don't believe in demons gnawing my feet off.

I climb down about another fifty feet before I see the second demon head. This one isn't smiling. I honestly don't know if that's better or worse. I'm not sure if the demon is annoyed that I've continued descending, or if he's thinking, *hey, if the grinning demon face didn't scare you away, there's not much else I can do.*

"We've got another demon head!" I call up.

"I apologize," Harriett calls down.

I'd like very much to begin climbing in the opposite direction now, but no, they're merely engravings. Pants-crappingly scary engravings, yet still just engravings. I'm not going to wuss out over some pictures.

Another fifty feet down, yep, there's another demon face. This one

has its mouth open, bellowing in rage. Now it's getting harder to breathe.

Will anybody even mourn me if I perish down here? Or will they say, *look, it's always a tragedy when a human being loses his life, but he climbed past three demon heads, for fuck's sake! What did he think was going to happen?*

I decide not to report this one. I take a moment to gather my courage and/or shoo away my sanity, and resume climbing.

The fourth demon head is grinning again. It's also three-dimensional. It's this big stone head protruding from the side of the well, and I don't care how much you scoff at the supernatural, this thing looks like it's going to bite you.

The fifth and sixth demon heads are also stone sculptures. It's starting to feel like this is a bottomless pit.

Finally, shining the light downward reveals a stone floor. I climb past the seventh demon head, this one with its tongue lolling out of its mouth, and step off the ladder.

There are a lot of dead leaves on the floor, but just the one rock that I'd dropped earlier. I'm glad to see that there are no skeletons. I'm not glad to see that my only option, aside from climbing back up, is a small circular hole, shaped like a mouse hole in a cartoon. I'll have to crawl.

I crouch down and shine the flashlight into it. I can't see the end. Wonderful.

"I have to crawl into a dark hole!" I shout up to my buddies on the surface. "Thank you so much!"

"We love you!" Seth calls down.

I'm certainly not going to quit now, so after some unpleasant muttering under my breath, I crawl into the hole. I'm sure it's filled with rats-a-plenty. What a joyous treat this is.

It's not so tight that I scrape my back against the stone ceiling, but it's far from spacious. After I crawl a few body-lengths into the tunnel, I can see that it starts to gradually slope downward, toward an unknown destination.

A piece of stone gives way beneath my right hand.

It kind of feels like I pressed a button. I hear a loud thud behind me. There's not really room to turn around, but I'm able to look over my shoulder and see that the exit has been sealed.

Okay, time for a panic attack.

"Hey!" I shout. "Can you guys hear me?"

There's no response.

I shout it again, as loudly as I possibly can, punctuated with harsh profanity.

Either they can't hear me, or I can't hear their response.

Though I know I'm meant to forge onward, I'm going to remain in a constant state of anxiety until I know that I can get out of here. So I push on the piece of stone over and over, hoping that it works as an on/off switch. Nothing happens.

I crawl backwards to the entrance, and kick the new stone wall a few times. It doesn't budge. I want to keep kicking and kicking until something happens, but that "something" will probably be my foot breaking, so I stop.

I take a few long, deep breaths in an unsuccessful effort to calm myself, and then start crawling forward again. I have no choice. I'll just have to hope that the person who designed this well wasn't the kind of fiend who would trap somebody down here to starve to death.

I've never encountered the "feeling like the walls are closing in on you" sensation before, but it's here, full force. I really just want to curl into a ball and cry.

If I hear scurrying, that's it. I'm done. Catatonia for life.

The downward slope isn't enough to make me feel like I'm slipping, but it's definitely unnerving. There's really nothing good I can say about this place.

Oh, look at that. Demon faces engraved on the stone floor where I'm crawling, just for me.

I can't believe that Harriett, Seth, Maraud, and Jeannie all get to relax up there in the comfy woods. It's not fair, especially since I'm the one who keeps having to pay for stuff. That's going to change.

On the plus side: still no rats.

Then I reach an inscription. Unlike the other one, this hasn't been worn down by the elements, and the words are perfectly clear.

*Fall with balance.*

Well, the actual meaning isn't clear. Fall with balance? It doesn't sound like something I want to try. I suspect that I won't have a choice in the matter.

After a little more crawling, I reach a hole in the floor. I shine the flashlight down into it and see iron spikes. Lots of iron spikes. There's a bare patch of the floor below that's maybe one square foot, but everything else is covered with spikes.

Apparently, my job is to jump down there. If I climb down and hold on to the edge of the hole, I estimate that I'll dangle about four feet above the floor. I have to land on the empty square, and then sustain my balance, or I'll topple over and get a body full of spikes.

I'm middle-aged. I'm not supposed to be performing feats of athleticism.

Harriett would be awesome at this. I'm sure she'd drop down there and remain statue-still, like a gymnast.

I'm again relieved that there are no skeletons, left there as

evidence that others have screwed this up. Although I suppose somebody could have cleaned up the bones, to be considerate to future jumpers.

I can sit up here and whimper, or I can get it over with. The longer I ruminate, the less happy I will be about the idea of falling onto a couple dozen spikes.

Of course, I can't hold on to the flashlight and the edge of the hole at the same time, so I'm going to have to drop in the dark. I'm sure the person who designed this place knew that.

I dangle my legs over the side and position them exactly where they need to be for the landing. I'm going to have to turn around so that I can hold on while I lower myself, but if I can keep my feet in the same spot, they'll remain spike-free. That can't be too difficult, right?

I wedge the flashlight into the waist of my pants, awkwardly turn around while trying to keep my legs in the same place, and then lower myself further into the hole. I'm pleasantly surprised by my upper body strength, although I think it's only because of the adrenaline.

Once my arms are fully extended, I brace myself for impact. I suddenly decide that I don't want to do this, and would much rather crawl all the way back to where I started and kick on the wall some more, but my fingers are slipping.

I let go, half-voluntarily.

An instant of free-fall.

I can almost feel the spike piercing the sole of my foot and bursting through the top.

But it doesn't. I land hard, biting the side of my mouth.

Then I start to topple forward.

I fling my arms out, trying to regain my balance.

I'm hopping on one freaking foot to keep from falling over.

Am I going to get a spike through the brain, or will they just impale my non-vital organs, allowing me the luxury of a slow death?

And then...I'm balanced.

I let out a laugh of relief that, quite frankly, makes me sound insane. I'm glad nobody heard it.

I take the flashlight out of my pants and shine it around the room. It's a pretty small room, maybe ten feet by ten feet, and there's another tunnel on the other side.

I have to walk over there, but there's enough room for my feet to fit between the spikes. If I topple over now, it'll be out of sheer clumsiness and I'll deserve my fate.

Somehow I make it to the other side without doing anything clumsy, and then I crawl into the next tunnel. What kind of psychopath builds a place like this? Seriously. It seems like an

incredible amount of labor for what is, presumably, extremely limited attendance. The construction and design team isn't even seeing the results, unless there's a webcam mounted somewhere that I haven't noticed. Underground tunnels like this can't be easy to make. If nothing else, why would you want to haul all of those bricks along that ridiculous road to get here? There's no income to be generated from this kind of project. Who does this?

This time, the tunnel slopes upward. Maybe that means I'm getting a little further from Hell.

The flashlight flickers. It had damn well better not die on me. I will break it into a billion pieces against the rock, I swear.

I crawl into another room. This one is also about ten feet by ten feet, though not as tall as the spiked room. When I stand up, I have to duck a bit to keep my head from hitting the ceiling.

Imbedded into the opposite wall are square rocks with the letters A through Z. They're in alphabetical order, not the QWERTY keyboard setup. I walk over there and read the inscription carved above the letters.

*Answer this riddle. A wrong answer is your demise.*

*I have but one eye. Horns blow at my approach.*

Ah, my first official Cyclops mention. This riddle's not so hard.

No, wait. Why would horns blow at a Cyclops's approach? That sounds more like a storm. Taken out of context, I'd immediately say that the answer was "storm," unless they were going for something more specific like "hurricane" or "tornado," but I'm down here to get a weapon to fight a Cyclops, so...

Is this riddle a trick question?

Is the Cyclops supposed to be a ruler? You'd blow horns at the approach of your Cyclops overlord, wouldn't you?

Crap. It's a stupidly easy riddle if the answer is "storm," but maybe the whole point is to verify that I'm here to acquire a Cyclops-killing weapon.

If they're going to expend this much effort into building this place, they should have hired better testers for the riddle.

Storm or Cyclops? Storm or Cyclops?

Trick question, or verification of the quest?

Technically, "storm" makes the most sense as an answer to the question, so I'm going to go with that and pray that the riddle-writer isn't dicking me over.

As I push each letter, it makes a sound like a hammer striking an anvil. S-T-O-R...I hesitate before pushing the M. If I'm wrong, it will be the last M that I ever push. That said, there doesn't seem to be any way to undo my choices, so M it is.

I wonder how I'll meet my demise? Will the floor drop out



beneath me? Will a trapdoor open in the ceiling, spilling out thousands of scorpions? Will the whole place just explode?

I push the M.

The entrance to another tunnel slides open. Guess I got it right.

How many more of these tests am I going to go through? You've got to figure that if there are *too* many of them, at some point they're just constructing challenges that nobody will ever do.

I crawl into the tunnel. This one is quite a bit smaller. Maraud would probably get stuck, so it's good that it's not his claustrophobic ass down here. If I'd known I'd be crawling around on rock, I'd have brought some kneepads. Or stayed home.

The tunnel gets narrower as I move through it, and for a very short moment, not even a second, I get stuck. It's amazing how much panic you can squeeze into less than a second. Though I don't scream, I do let out the loudest gasp of my life while my stomach drops, my heart freezes, and my testicles retract. But I push through it and continue to crawl until I emerge into another room.

This room is smaller than the others. There's a stone pedestal in the center. Another tunnel, which I'm sure I'll get to crawl into soon, is blocked by thick steel bars.

Upon the pedestal is inscribed: *Place all of your possessions here. Then walk the path bare.*

I'm not a fan of the idea of letting go of my flashlight, but I suppose I should continue to follow the rules. I place the flashlight on the pedestal, and then my wallet.

Am I really supposed to take off my clothes? Have these challenges suddenly gone all pervy? It's not like there's even anybody around to see me, and I'm not overly modest anyway, but the idea of stripping naked down here does seem a bit peculiar.

Well, I've come this far. I don't want to tell Harriett that I risked spike-impalement but balked at exposing my genitals.

I take off all of my clothes and place them on the pedestal, along with the flashlight. Then I stand there, nekkid, waiting for something to happen.

Nothing happens.

I guess I'm supposed to walk a path, but I don't see any path. I assumed I'd be going through the tunnel that's blocked by the bars.

I crouch down and try to lift them. They don't budge.

I stand back up. Now what?

Should I just be walking around the room? There's no freaking path! Unless we're getting into really messed-up territory like "your possessions also include the fillings in your teeth," I've done what I'm supposed to do.

I stand there for a while, feeling ridiculous.

"Hello?" I call out.

"Sorry, sorry," an unfamiliar male voice responds, from behind the bars. "Hold on a second."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I am so startled by the voice that I step backwards, slip, and land on my uncovered ass. At least I don't strike the pedestal. It would really suck to come this far only to crack my skull open.

I hurriedly get to my feet as a man, maybe thirty years old, crawls into view right behind the bars. He's wearing glasses and a blue polo shirt.

"This was supposed to open for you," he says. He pounds on something, and the bars rise out of the way. "Ah, there we go." He crawls out of the tunnel and stands up.

"Uh, hi," I say.

"Hi," he says back. He looks like a totally normal, clean-cut guy. He wipes his palm off on his jeans, then nervously extends his hand to me. "I'm Jake."

I shake his hand. "Evan."

"Sorry about the nudity," he says. "Not my idea, I assure you."

"Whose idea was it?"

Jake shrugs. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions, so I want to say upfront that I'm not some all-knowing being. My dad built this place, and I helped him keep an eye on it. He died a couple of years ago."

"So...what is this place?"

"It's where we keep the weapon."

"The Cyclops-slaying weapon?"

"Yeah."

"Are you saying that there really is a Cyclops?" I ask.

Jake shrugs again. "Damned if I know. I'm just here to make sure the weapon goes to the right person. Gun to my head and forced to commit one way or the other, I'd say, yeah, there's probably a Cyclops. But I haven't seen it or anything. It's all in the prophecy."

"This whole maze is in the prophecy?"

"Yeah. Sucks that my dad didn't get to see it play out. It was really frustrating for him to put this much work into the place and never have anybody show up to venture through it. Fate can be a cruel beast."

"So that's how you spend your life? Watching over this place?"

Jake laughs. "Nah, but that would be nice. A recliner, big-screen

TV, ESPN and I'd be set for life. Sadly, no, I've got a job and wife and kids and all the normal stuff. A sensor went off when you climbed into the well. I sped out here and then I've been watching you through the hidden cameras."

"I didn't see any cameras."

"That's why I said hidden cameras."

"Oh, right. Of course." I'm suddenly very conscious of how ridiculous it is that I am standing completely naked in an underground cavern chatting about a prophecy. "Mind if I get dressed?"

"You've got to get through one more room to prove that you're worthy."

"And if I'm not?"

"I guess I hose the place down and wait a couple more decades."

"Just for the record, that riddle needed at least one more draft.

Multiple answers would've technically been correct."

"Multiple answers *were* correct. Pretty much any variation on 'storm,' as long as it was spelled correctly, would've gotten you through. It was a trick question to see if you would answer 'Cyclops,' since the horn part didn't make any sense."

"Oh. Still, for future prophecies, a riddle like that should have a definitive answer."

Jake grins. "You can fill out a comment card as you exit."

"How would I have died if I got it wrong?"

"Spikes."

"Dropping from the ceiling?"

"You still have one room left. You probably shouldn't get too distracted. I'm really not even supposed to be talking to you."

"What would it take to get you to skip the last room and just give me the weapon?" I ask.

"Are you offering me a bribe?"

"No, just asking."

"You've come too far not to see this through. And I've been waiting my whole life to see what's going to happen. So crawl on into that tunnel and fulfill your destiny."

I kneel down in front of the tunnel. "It's not my destiny. I'm helping a friend."

"Whatever."

I crawl into the dark tunnel. I wonder if I should have tackled Jake and forced him to give me the weapon. He might not have put up that much of a struggle against a middle-aged naked dude.

At least this is the last tunnel, presumably. I'll never have to crawl naked through a dark tunnel again. Maybe on the twentieth anniversary of this adventure I'll crawl through one, just for old times sake, but it will be strictly voluntary.

After about fifty feet, the tunnel ends and I emerge into a large room, about the size of a basketball court. This time, the floor is wooden, and it's carved into a ridiculously complex maze.

If I step off the maze, my foot will come down on a metal spike. There are lots and lots and lots of opportunities to step off the maze.

An inscription covers the far wall: *When darkness falls, begin your walk. Reach the end by the count of twenty or all is lost.*

No way in hell can I memorize this maze.

No way in hell can I carefully make my way along the path in twenty seconds.

So, yeah, I get how this works. I have to just go for it and trust that each step is the correct one.

By the end of this, I'll either be a believer, or I'll have a great big metal spike jutting out of my foot.

The lights go out.

No time for silent reflection about how much this sucks. Time to go.

It's completely dark, but I close my eyes anyway, hoping that it will help me tap into whatever guidance Harriett has been receiving all this time.

I just walk. Fast.

I turn left, then right, then left again.

My foot doesn't step off the maze.

I go forward a few steps, then left, then forward some more.

I can't believe my foot hasn't been spiked.

How the hell am I doing this?

I suddenly feel like I should leap over a gap that I can't see, so I do. I land on the other side, slip a bit, but keep going.

I'm not sure how much time I have left. I haven't been counting in my head.

I turn right. My toes slip over the side of the maze but not far enough for me to lose my balance. I keep up the fast walk.

I'm doing this. I'm really doing it.

Am I doing it quickly enough?

Can't worry about that.

No, I should worry about it a little. I've got to be almost out of time. I feel like I'm close to the end, but I've got to pick up the pace or I'm going to die a couple of seconds from the finish line.

I start to run.

Then I smack face-first into a stone wall.

The lights come on.

I did it! My face hurts like hell, but I did it!

I stand there for a moment, basking in my victory. I'll worry about the disruption to my belief system later.

Okay, now what?

I glance around the room.

Jake's voice sounds over a speaker: "Sorry, sorry, a panel was supposed to slide open. I guess we should've done more regular maintenance on this place. How about you just head back and get your clothes, and I'll meet you there?"

I walk back across the maze, which is actually more difficult when I can actually see where I'm going. I have to retrace my steps several times to get to the other side, but at least I don't accidentally slip and skewer my foot, which would be annoyingly ironic.

I crawl through the tunnel, and then get dressed. I'm simply not a naturalist at heart. I'll keep my nakedness in the shower and the bedroom, thank you very much.

While I tie my shoes, Jake crawls through the same tunnel. "Congratulations," he says. "I watched you through the night-vision camera. That was some impressive navigation."

"Thanks."

"The footage is already online."

"Seriously?"

"Nah, I'm kidding."

"I thought maybe there was an audience for naked maze-walkers."

"A missed opportunity," Jake says. He reaches into his pocket. "Anyway, there would've been more fanfare if the sliding panel had worked, but here's your weapon."

He takes out a chain bracelet and hands it to me. It's like a charm bracelet with only one charm: a tiny little silver eyeball.

"That's it?" I ask.

"Yes, sir."

"What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"Slay a Cyclops."

"One the size of an ant? I guess if it's gerbil-sized I could strangle it with the chain." I put it around my wrist. It's not even very stylish.

"I'm not impressed with it either," Jake admits. "But that's the weapon I'm supposed to give you. And now my role in the prophecy is over. However, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could you e-mail me when this is all over and let me know what happened?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Thanks." He hands me a slip of paper with his e-mail address written on it.

"What are you going to do with this place now that it's served its purpose?"

"I'm not sure. Theme park, maybe?"

"Not very conveniently located."

"I'll probably just let it sit here. You can have it if you want. A

great big underground souvenir."

I smile and shake his hand. "Thanks for your help."

"Good luck in your quest. I opened one of the hidden passages in the tunnel. Just crawl through there and you'll find your way out."

I kneel next to the tunnel, then glance back at him. "Would you have let me bleed to death if I slipped off the maze?"

"Life is full of mysteries."

I crawl into the tunnel. As soon as I'm inside, I can see light streaming from a side passage, so I crawl in there. From that point, the tunnel doesn't curve at all except for a slight incline. It takes several minutes, but finally I climb out of a hole into the woods.

If I've gone through all of this only to discover that Harriett and the others have been devoured by coyotes, I'm going to be really miffed.

I wander through the woods for a bit, hoping I'm not going the wrong way, but after a couple of minutes I see Seth, Maraud, and Jeannie still standing around the well, peering down into it.

"Hi guys!" I call out.

It's kind of heartwarming how thrilled they all look to see me. Seth leans further over the side of the well. "You can come back up!" he shouts. "He's here!"

I hurry over to the well and am greeted by hugs from Seth and Jeannie and a polite nod from Maraud. A minute later, Harriett climbs out of the well and then gives me a hug that almost knocks me over.

"I was so worried about your safety," she says.

"Me too."

"What happened?"

"Lots of stuff. I was naked for part of it."

Harriett raises an eyebrow.

"It was a very weird time in my life," I say.

"Did you get the weapon?" Seth asks.

I hold up my wrist.

Seth frowns. "Pretty small nuclear device."

"Yeah. I guess we're going to kill it with a charm bracelet."

"May I see that?" asks Harriett.

I take off the bracelet and hand it to her. "Sure. It's yours. My gift to you."

Harriett closely examines the bracelet for a moment. Then she pinches the eyeball charm between the thumb and index finger of her right hand, and with the thumb and index finger of her left hand she very carefully turns the iris, which I guess is like a twist-off cap. She removes the iris and looks inside.

"What's in there?" Seth asks.

"Poison, I assume." Harriett screws the cap back on.

"That's not very much," says Jeannie.

"Not very much at all," says Harriett. "I was hoping for something more destructive. Perhaps we can taint its food, once we're absolutely certain of what it will eat. But we have the weapon, and Evan didn't lose his life."

Maraud taps the "*Send only your disbeliever*" inscription. "You a believer now?"

"I'm not sure what I am."

I tell them everything that happened down there. Maraud suggests that we should have kidnapped Jake, because the guy probably knows more than he shared, but everybody else agrees with me that I should not have done such a thing.

Do I believe in the Cyclops now? I'm not sure. Technically, going down the well only confirmed the existence of the weird-ass ability to sense the right direction in which to travel. But I already knew that; I'd just never experienced it myself. So I suppose that my stance on the Cyclops issue is: "I believe in the possibility more than I did before."

"I cannot apologize enough for what happened," says Harriett. "I had no idea you were descending into that much danger."

"Me either. It's fine."

"I feel bad about the other attempts to end your life, but I feel particularly bad about this because you had to go through it alone. This wasn't supposed to be your destiny."

"It's totally okay," I assure her. "I made it out alive and without any new injuries. We're cool. What's next?"

"We get back in the vehicle and travel to the town."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I will at the—"

"—at the right time. Gotcha."

\*

We're all crammed into the car again. I'm not looking forward to another long twisty bumpy drive along the path, but at least it's better than crawling around in underground tunnels.

After a couple of minutes, Seth slams on the brakes.

"Was that there before?" he asks, pointing through the windshield.

A sign on the side of the road reads, "*Welcome To Rapport*."

"No," says Harriett. "It certainly wasn't."

"Do you think maybe that Jake guy from the well snuck out here and put it up really quick?"

"It's possible."



"Is Rapport the town with the Cyclops?" Jeannie asks.

"Yeah," I say.

"Interesting."

"Well, this is good," says Seth. "It'll save us some wear and tear on the car."

He resumes driving.

It's just a sign. Nothing to get weirded out about. It is, in fact, entirely plausible that Jake came out here and put it up. Or that we simply missed it, since we'd have been looking at the back of it and it wouldn't necessarily have stood out from the rest of the trees.

A couple of minutes later, we see something to get weirded out about.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Unless I'm somehow misremembering how we drove on a narrow winding path for well over an hour, there should not be a paved road here. It should not have buildings on each side, like a quaint small town Main Street.

Seth stops the car again. "I guess I...accidentally took a shortcut?"

"Mass hallucination," says Maraud. "Some kind of chemical in the well water and we inhaled it."

"There wasn't any water in the well," I say.

"Then we rubbed up against the chemical somewhere else. Doesn't matter. Either way, we can't be seeing this town for real."

"It looks pretty real," I say. I'd just reached the point where I was mentally prepared for the possibility that the Cyclops existed, and now I have to deal with a town appearing out of nowhere? This adventure isn't being kind to my brain.

"Was this in the prophecy?" Jeannie asks Harriett.

"No, but apparently there are quite a few glaring omissions."

We all just sit there for a moment.

"Anybody's hallucination faded yet?" asks Maraud.

"Nope," says Seth.

"Not mine," says Jeannie.

We sit there for another moment.

"We might as well just drive on in, right?" I ask.

"Yeah," says Seth. "Everybody keep an eye out for a Cyclops."

He resumes the drive. The town looks like any other small town. There's a diner, a drug store, and, wow, an actual video store? They all have cars parked out front. The sign on the building clearly says *"Rapport Video."*

"It doesn't feel much like a town that's in the grip of terror," Jeannie notes. "But I guess I didn't really know what to expect."

"I have to admit, I thought there'd be more screaming populace," says Harriett. "We certainly can't read anything into what we've seen so far. We need to stop and talk to somebody."

Seth parks in front of Ginny's Diner. We all get out of the car. It's a beautiful day, sun shining, not a cloud in the sky. The air has the faint smell of cotton candy.

"I should probably wait out here," says Maraud. "Some say I'm intimidating."

"They're correct," says Harriett. "You can explore while we're inside."

"I'll come with him," says Seth. "Until we know for sure what's going on, nobody should wander around alone."

"Yes, I'll feel much safer with you by my side," says Maraud.

Seth ignores the sarcasm. "You probably already know this," he tells Harriett, "but don't lead with any Cyclops questions. Feel the situation out first. Maybe Evan could nudge you or something when the time is right."

"I promise to consider the proper timing," Harriett assures him.

Harriett, Jeannie, and I walk into the diner. It looks like any other diner that I've ever been in. There are eleven or twelve other customers, and they're all staring at us. They aren't even pretending to do otherwise.

A sign tells us to please wait to be seated, so we wait. Everybody continues to stare at us. I'm surprised that the jukebox didn't stop with a record-scratch sound.

A young big-haired blonde waitress pushes through a swinging door with a tray of food. She hesitates for a moment as she sees us, but then smiles. "Be right with you."

We wait patiently as she delivers sandwiches, a side of veggies, and drinks to a table of customers who don't look away from us as they receive their lunch.

"C'mon now, everybody, act civilized," the waitress tells the diners. "We don't want our guests thinking that we're rude." She walks over to us, smoothing out her apron. "I'm sorry," she says. "Everybody in Rapport is in everybody else's business, and we don't see much in the way of new people."

"Not a problem," I say, flashing her what I hope is a charming smile.

"Table for three?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She leads us to a booth and hands us menus. "Back in a sec to take your drink order," she says, walking back through the swinging door.

Jeannie opens her menu. "I guess you wouldn't get many visitors when your town is some sort of interdimensional portal."

"We don't know that it's an interdimensional portal," says Harriett.

"Just making conversation."

A couple of the customers have returned to their meals, but most of them are still staring at us. Never have I been more tempted to say, "Why don't you take a picture? It'll last longer!" though of course I don't, because I am not eight years old.

I assumed the menu would contain burgers, fries, and milkshakes. Instead, it's a very limited selection of things like cucumber sandwiches, pan-fried squash, and a bowl of beets. There are no Cyclops-themed beverages.

"How long is it appropriate for people to stare at strangers?" I whisper. It seems like they would have realized by now that they're becoming creepy.

"Depends how long it's been since they've seen one," Jeannie whispers back.

I wonder why the waitress went into the back room? Probably to drop off the empty tray or to get somebody else's order. That's what servers do in restaurants. I'm sure it wasn't to grab a shotgun. I shouldn't even be thinking along those lines.

The waitress returns, not holding a shotgun, or even a meat cleaver. She returns to our table and takes a notebook out of her pocket. Her nametag identifies her as "Mary Beth."

"What can I get you?" she asks with a smile.

"Do you grow your own vegetables here?" I ask. "It's an interesting selection."

Mary Beth looks unsure whether to answer. "Yes, we do. I mean, not here specifically. All through Rapport. We're self-sustained and proud of it."

We each order a cucumber sandwich and a glass of water. Mary Beth keeps smiling, but it seems strained. I wonder if we should just come right out and ask if there have been any recent Cyclops sightings in the area.

"Let me know if you need anything else," she says, heading back through the swinging door.

"This place is odd," says Jeannie.

Most of the diner patrons have finally returned to their own meals and conversations, though an elderly couple continues to stare at us as if a duck-billed platypus is bouncing on each of our heads, singing show tunes.

"It's normal to distrust strangers," says Harriett. "And our arrival at this town does violate basic laws of physics, so they're right to stare."

"Should we just ask about the monster?" Jeannie whispers.

I shake my head. "I was thinking that, too, but let's not blow our cover quite yet. We're in no rush. Let's be casual."

I wonder if Maraud is being casual. Not likely.

We sit around, not really talking, until a few minutes later when Mary Beth returns with our food.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" I ask.

"Of course not," she says, still smiling, though it's clearly requiring a lot of effort. "What's your question?"

"We're new in town, obviously," I say. "We're just passing through, so we don't know what there is to do in Rapport. Any suggestions?"

"Passing through?"

"Yes."

"Not many people just pass through Rapport."

"No?"

"No."

"Well, that's what we're doing. Figured we'd stop here for the afternoon, take a break from driving, see what's around."

"Have you been driving long?"

"All the way from Florida."

"That's pretty far."

"Yeah."

"Disneyland, right?"

"Disney World, yes."

"Never been there."

"It's fun. You should go."

"I doubt I will, but it was nice of you to offer." Her smile vanishes for a second, then returns. "Is there anything else you need to enjoy your meal?"

"No, I think we're okay."

"All right. I'll be back to check on you."

We eat our sandwiches mostly in silence. I feel kind of bad that we're here chowing down while Seth and Maraud are out exploring, but they'll probably stop at a pizza place or something. The sandwiches actually aren't bad, though the greasy burgers at the tavern were better, and I suspect that this meal won't end with Harriett gleefully making out with a hot guy in his truck.

Jeannie keeps checking her cell phone and informing us that there's no reception. "This is making me nuts," she says.

"I'm sure your grandson is fine," says Harriett.

"Yeah, he's fine. I know he's fine. I need to stop treating him like a baby." Jeannie checks her cell phone again. "I hope he's keeping the cooler stocked. Most people who come into the shop don't even want a souvenir; they just want a cold drink."

"The cooler is stocked," I say.

"You have no way of knowing that."

"I know. But I'm good at offering meaningless reassurance."

"Fair enough," says Jeannie. "I accept your meaningless reassurance. I'm sure he's fine. I'm sure the shop is fine. Not to be selfish, but it's myself I should be worried about right now."

"You'll be fine, too," I assure her.

"Uh-huh. Was this a mistake?"

"Possibly. But it's sure feeling less and less like we're wasting our

time."

Jeannie grins. "You're right about that."

"I'm sorry," says Harriett. "I've never been skilled at meaningless reassurance. It's one of the many personality traits I'm going to try to develop once our job here is done."

"You're fine," I tell her, popping a piece of cucumber that fell out of my sandwich into my mouth. "It's kind of nice that you babble less than most people."

"Thank you."

As we finish up our meal, Mary Beth walks back to our table. "Can I interest you in any dessert? Zucchini bread, perhaps?"

I look her directly in the eye. I'm not sure what message I'm trying to convey. I guess I'm just trying to figure out if *she* has any message for me. "Do you recommend it?" I ask.

Mary Beth shrugs. "Depends if you're still hungry."

This is a really lame exchange of hidden messages.

"I think we're set," I say. "Thanks."

"All right. I'll go grab your check."

This hasn't been a very productive lunch, but hopefully Seth and Maraud have more information. Mary Beth goes over to the register, prints out a receipt, and sets it on the table. I take out my wallet, because obviously I'm going to be the one paying for this damn meal. I remove my credit card and set it on the receipt.

Mary Beth walks back over and picks up the card. She looks at it as if it's a piece of alien technology and sets it back down. "I'm really sorry," she says. "We can't take plastic. Cash only."

Crap. That's something I should have asked about before we ordered. I wonder if she'll give us a break if I say that I used the last of my cash to finance a cage fight?

"I've got it," says Jeannie. She opens her purse, takes out a twenty, and hands it to Mary Beth.

"Thank you. I'll get your change."

"Sorry," I tell Jeannie. I've seen enough bizarre stuff this week that The Diner That Wouldn't Accept Credit Cards is pretty low on the list, so I'm not sure why it's this unnerving. A couple of the people who'd stopped staring at us are now staring at us again.

Mary Beth brings back Jeannie's change and gives us one last strained smile before she leaves. I glance down at the receipt. Upon it, in red pen, she's written: "*Help us. Please.*"

Wonderful.

I tap the receipt to make sure that Harriett and Jeannie see it. Jeannie scoops it into her pocket with the rest of her change, and we get up and leave the diner.

When we step outside, at least fifteen people are now standing on

the sidewalk and in the street, watching us. They're all keeping their distance, but it's hard to imagine that they're outside for any reason except to gawk at the out-of-towners.

I wave to them. Nobody waves back.

I look around. No sign of Seth and Maraud. "The subtle approach isn't getting us anywhere. Let's just tell somebody why we're here."

"Not with this many people watching, though," says Jeannie.

"Maybe the video store?"

We walk into the video store. It's got a pretty shoddy selection of DVDs. I take a quick glance at the New Releases section; they don't seem to have updated their stock in a few years. No customers are in the store, so we go straight up to the counter. I ring the bell.

A thin, gray-haired man who looks like he hit retirement age a few years ago steps out from a back room. He sees us, stops, and looks momentarily uncertain whether he should greet us or run. After a few seconds of indecision, he walks up to the counter. "May I help you?"

"My name is Evan," I say. "This is Harriett, and this is Jeannie."

"Pleased to meet you." He adjusts his nametag. "I'm Martin.

Marty."

"Hello, Marty," I say. "What can you tell me about a Cyclops?"

Marty sucks in a deep breath, but composes himself. "Not much, I'm afraid. You'd need an English professor or mythology expert, I suppose. I'm just a clerk."

"But let's say I was taking a random survey of what everyday citizens knew about Cyclopes."

"That's not a common topic for random surveys."

"Pretend I'm a reporter. National Cyclops Day is coming up. What can your average video store clerk tell me about them?"

"Almost nothing."

"Almost?"

"Nothing."

"You have to know something. For example, how many eyes do they have?"

"Sir, my job is to rent movies to people. If you'd like to rent a movie, I can help you out. If you're here to talk about things that simply don't exist, then you're holding up the line."

"There's no line."

"Then you're keeping me from taking a nap. Go away."

"Why did you say 'things that simply don't exist'?" Jeannie asks him.

Marty looks confused by her question. "Because they don't."

"But why would you clarify that? If three strangers came in asking what you knew about the Trix rabbit, you wouldn't assume that they thought he was real, would you?"

"Huh?"

"Is there a Cyclops in Rapport?"

Marty's eyes shift back and forth, but then he seems to relax.

"Sure. There's one on every street corner. Can't walk ten feet without stumbling over one of those things."

"We're serious, Marty."

"And I'm serious that you're wasting my time. It's disrespectful of you to come in here and act like I'm some sort of fool. Let me get back to work. Go find another town to harass."

"All right," I say. "We apologize."

We leave the video store. There are at least four or five new people standing outside, staring at us. Rapport's slogan should be: *The town where manners aren't really our highest priority, but hey, we've got a Cyclops problem, so give us a break.*

I wave to them again. One little kid waves back, and his mom quickly pulls his arm down and ushers him away.

Still no sign of Seth and Maraud. There's absolutely no reason to be concerned. If Maraud were in a fight, we'd hear it.

"Hi," I say to no onlooker in particular. "We're new in town. We've got some questions for the fine people of Rapport. Anybody in the mood for a chat?"

Now instead of staring at us, the people suddenly avoid eye contact. It's almost comical the way they all look away at once, pretending to be very interested in the sky or ground.

"You have nothing to fear from us," says Harriett, sounding like a Martian leader explaining that they probably aren't going to start disintegrating humans left and right. "We just want to talk."

"I'll talk to you," says a kid, maybe nineteen or twenty years old, as he jogs up to us. He's got long black hair and a goatee that isn't filled in all the way. "The others are scared, but I'm not."

"Thank you," says Harriett. "We appreciate that. We've come a long way."

"No problem. Let's not talk in the street with all these mouth-breathers gaping at us. Let's try the video store."

"We were just there," I say. "Marty kicked us out."

"Marty's a crabby old geezer. He doesn't own the place. He can't stop us from..." The kid trails off as we notice a sheriff's car driving down the street toward us. Several people move off the street to get out of its way. The kid quickly steps away from us, looking at the ground.

Even though there's a parking spot available, the car stops in the middle of the street. The sheriff, a very stern looking woman in her mid-thirties, gets out. The crowd doesn't exactly disperse, but onlookers do give her room.



The sheriff walks over to us. "Hello," she says, in a voice that isn't *quite* unfriendly. "My name is Sheriff Lindsey McGarnet. And you are?"

"I'm Evan Portin," I say. "This is Harriett Lancaster and Jeannie Erickson."

"You're causing quite a stir, Evan, Harriett, and Jeannie."

"I'm not sure why. We just drove into town and got some lunch."

"Hmmm."

"It's not illegal to ask questions, is it?"

"No sir, it is not. We're a suspicious group, and we're justified in being that way, but I hope I didn't imply that you were doing anything wrong. We just have to be careful is all."

"That's perfectly understandable."

"Would your line of query be related to a one-eyed beast? And by that I don't mean your genitalia."

"Yeah, actually, it would."

Sheriff McGarnet nods. "Then your best bet is to talk to the mayor. I have a feeling he'll want to speak with you as soon as possible."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Perfect, thanks," I say. "Where is he?"

"Not too far up the road," says Sheriff McGarnet. "I'll give you a lift."

"We have to find our friends first."

"A big hairy gentleman, and a smaller, not-so-hairy gentleman?"

"That's them."

"They were asking strange questions at our pastry shop. That's why I was called. I can't fit all five of you in my car, so I'll have somebody pick them up, too. They won't cause us any trouble, will they?"

"Maraud might."

"Maraud's the big one?"

"Yes."

"Our law enforcement skills don't get much of a workout in these parts. If he does give us a problem, it might be a nice change of pace. Come on, let's go get some of your *and* our questions answered."

We walk over to her car. Jeannie and I get in the back, while Harriett sits up front. Metal grate protects the driver from the unsavory people in the back, which I believe is pretty outdated, but I've never ridden in the back of a police car so I can't say for sure. McGarnet does a three-point turn, then drives back the way she came.

"So is there a Cyclops?" I ask.

McGarnet glances up at me in the rear-view mirror. "That question is above my pay scale."

"You've got to know."

"I do know. And I know that if I answer it before I'm authorized to do so, I'll get demoted to a brand-new pay scale that won't cover my bills. Save that question for when you talk to the mayor. He'll be interested to hear it."

The fact that her response wasn't, "Of course there's no Cyclops! What are you, a simpleton?" is very disconcerting. I have to admit, I'm ready for anything at this point.

We drive a few more blocks, past various buildings that continue to look like they belong in any standard-issue small town. I almost expect to see citizens lining the streets, watching us like a parade, but

after the first block or so there aren't many people outdoors. But there are enough people outdoors that the lack of them isn't weird. Basically, there are a normal number of people outdoors.

McGarnet turns right and parks in front of a small building. It doesn't look like a place where we'd have a discussion with the mayor. It is, in fact, a Laundromat.

"Is the mayor washing his clothes?" asks Jeannie.

McGarnet's features soften and she gives us a sheepish grin. "Like I said, we don't have much opportunity to practice law enforcement around here. I forgot to check you for weapons. Can't have you armed when we go in to see the mayor. You understand, right?"

Harriett glances at her bracelet. "I have nothing," she says.

"No weapons here," I say, holding up my hands. "We left them in the car."

"Good," says McGarnet. "I apologize for sounding like I don't trust you, but I had to ask."

"What about you?" I ask.

"I have a gun. This isn't meant to be fair."

There's a *crackle* sound. Harriett cries out and then flops over. There's more crackling as McGarnet leans over her. After McGarnet opens the door and exits the vehicle, I can see that the sheriff is holding a stun gun.

She goes around to Jeannie's side. Jeannie scoots closer to me, and twists herself around so that she can deliver a vicious kick if necessary.

McGarnet opens the door. "Just stay calm," she says. "If you panic, it'll be worse. The best thing you can do for yourself is to let this happen."

I try to open my door, but, not surprisingly, it's locked.

Jeannie kicks her. Though it's one hell of a kick, it doesn't connect with McGarnet's stomach (which I assume was the target) but rather her leg. I'm sure it hurts, but it doesn't disable the sheriff enough to stop her from jamming the stun gun against Jeannie's thigh.

As Jeannie twitches, McGarnet continues to press the stun gun into her thigh, holding it there for several seconds. When she finally removes it, Jeannie has gone completely still. McGarnet takes her revolver out of its holster and points it at Jeannie.

"Your friends won't be out for long. If you resist me, I'll have to shoot them. I'm not going to kill them, but I *will* shoot them in the kneecaps, and then I'll shoot you in the kneecaps, and you'll still get zapped. If you cooperate you can save everybody a lot of pain. Make your choice quick."

"I'll cooperate," I say.

"Stick your leg over here."

It seems kind of foolish to offer up my leg to somebody with a stun gun, but I'm not sure I have any choice. I certainly don't want the three of us to take bullets to the knees. If we're not being murdered outright, we probably won't be murdered later. At least that's what I tell myself as I awkwardly turn around in the seat and place my leg over Jeannie's prone body.

"Thank you," says the sheriff. Then I brace myself for the jolt of pain as she presses the stun gun into my thigh.

My whole body seizes up and I let out a yelp.

She keeps the stun gun there for a few seconds. It hurts less than getting my kneecap blown apart, presumably, but there is no enjoyment to be found.

I lay there, paralyzed and twitching, as McGarnet hurriedly binds our hands behind our backs with plastic restraints. She slams the door shut. I wait optimistically for Harriett to spring to life and take her out, but though I can't actually see through the seat, it's pretty obvious that Harriett too has been handcuffed.

I try to say something ("Perhaps you'll reconsider this unpleasant endeavor?") but my mouth isn't working yet. McGarnet shuts the passenger-side door, then gets back behind the wheel and drives away from the Laundromat.

"I apologize for all of this," McGarnet tells us. "I hate having to take such drastic measures, but unfortunately that's the way of the world."

"Are you going to let us go?" Harriett asks, not sitting up. Her words are slurred but I can get the general gist of what she's asking.

The sheriff doesn't answer for a few moments. "I'm afraid not," she finally says. "Sorry."

A few blocks later we arrive at the sheriff's office, which looks like it could, at most, contain one jail cell and a couple of desks. McGarnet parks and shuts off the engine.

"If you try to escape, I'm going to zap the hell out of you," she says. "I mean, the *hell* out of you. You don't want that. Think about that before you start trying to kick out a window or something. It won't be worth it."

I try to say, "We're here to help you," but only one of the words is actually recognizable as a word.

"You are helping." I guess McGarnet understood me.

"Our quest is to slay the Cyclops," says Harriett.

McGarnet laughs. "For real?"

"Yes. We're fulfilling a prophecy."

"Lots of prophecies out there, I guess." She shrugs. "Maybe yours is the right one. Who knows? But I've got to go with ours, which works out a little differently."

"When do we get to talk to the mayor?" Jeannie asks.

"You don't. There hasn't been a mayor in months. I'm in charge." McGarnet opens the car door. "Remember what I said about getting zapped." She gets out of the car and shuts the door behind her.

"This isn't how it was supposed to go," says Harriett, sounding near tears.

"Yeah, I was envisioning a pretty different outcome too," I say.

"We were supposed to be greeted as heroes."

"We can still be heroes at some point," I say. "We don't know what she has planned for us. After all we've been through, being handcuffed in the back of a cop car is no big deal. It's kind of relaxing. Maybe we should try to get in a quick nap while we're waiting."

"Stop trying to be funny."

"I can't see you through the seat so I can't tell if you're being serious or not."

"I'm serious about you not being funny."

"We're going to be okay," I assure her. "This is nothing. I didn't go through that whole underground cavern to let some lunatic sheriff end our journey here. She's keeping us alive, and if she's keeping us alive, we can get out of this. Even if Maraud and Seth aren't chasing us down at this very moment, and they probably are, we can get out of this."

"Thank you for your meaningless reassurance."

"Being sarcastic and bitchy doesn't suit you, Harriett."

"You're right, you're right," she says. "I'm just...no, you're right."

"She said not to kick out a window," says Jeannie, "but I'm not convinced that we shouldn't."

"I am," I say.

"Why?"

"Because I can't imagine that she's actually leaving us so thoroughly unattended that we could break out of here and run for it. She'd have to be rock-stupid."

"Maybe she is rock-stupid and we're not taking advantage of it."

"I'm not saying that there's no possible chance she's that dumb, but I think it's very unlikely. It's not worth having her come back and zap us until we lose control of our bodily functions."

Jeannie sighs. "I suppose you're right."

"I don't want to be passive. I just don't want to be permanently disabled."

"Can those things permanently disable you?"

"I think so. I didn't research it because I didn't expect it to ever become an issue in my life."

"Then what's our plan?" Jeannie asks.

"For now? I guess be passive."

About a minute later, which would not have given us enough time to kick out the car windows, figure out how to unlock the door with our hands bound behind our backs, and flee out of gunshot range, McGarnet returns. A tall, lanky guy who kind of looks like Don Knotts except for his soulless eyes is with her. He's holding a rag, a small bottle, and some pillowcases.

Sheriff McGarnet opens the back door as the lanky guy pours some liquid onto the rag. "Again, don't make me zap you," she says.

I don't make her zap me.

\*

When I wake up, my hands are still cuffed behind me, but I'm standing up and my arms seem to be wrapped around the trunk of a tree, or maybe a telephone pole—I can't tell because there's a pillowcase over my head.

I guess Maraud and Seth didn't save us, dammit.

My legs are really sore. I think I've been here for a while.

"Hey!" I say. "Harriett? Jeannie? Are you there?"

I hear somebody walk over to me. I brace myself for a punch to the face. At least the pillowcase will cushion it a bit.

The pillowcase comes off. It's Sheriff McGarnet. She holds up her stun gun, indicating that the whole "cause any problems and I'll zap the hell out of you" concept is still in play.

We're outdoors. In a park, I think. I'm cuffed to a pole that's about ten feet high. There are two poles to my left, and two poles to my right. Harriett and Jeannie are cuffed to the poles to my left, which I guess was to be expected. Maraud and Seth, who still have pillowcases over their heads, are cuffed to the poles to my right, which I'd hoped would not be the case but was probably inevitable.

The poles have been carved into a bunch of freaky looking faces, stacked on top of each other, like a totem pole. They've been painted in bright colors. I don't immediately see any Cyclops faces carved in them, but at the moment I don't have time to look at every single face.

There is a huge curtain in front of us, big enough to hide all five of us from what sounds like a large crowd of people on the other side. It's the dull roar of an audience waiting for a concert to begin.

The lanky guy holds a small bottle next to Maraud's nose then pulls off the pillowcase. McGarnet holds up the stun gun. I assume that Maraud has already been on the receiving end of it, because he remains quiet.

After Seth is awake and uncovered, McGarnet picks up a

megaphone, then walks around the curtain. The crowd applauds.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Rapport," she says through the megaphone. "We've had a difficult go of it, but today I bring you good news. Miraculous news."

Harriett and Maraud are both trying to tug themselves free. I admire their effort, but the only outcome I see is the totem pole toppling over and crushing them.

"We've lived in fear for years. But that fear ends now. Many of you have seen the strangers in our midst. What I have had to keep secret is that these strangers are the key to our freedom! It's in a prophecy. I know it sounds crazy, but their sacrifice will mean an end to our nightmare."

The curtain drops. There are hundreds of people gathered in the park. Some wooden barricades have been set up, though if the mob decided to rush forward and tear us limb from limb, there's not really anything that could stop it.

There's a collective gasp as the crowd sees us.

"These are our sacrifices," says Sheriff McGarnet into the megaphone. "We will offer them to the Cyclops. This will not only satisfy his hunger, but it will release us!"

Suddenly everybody is talking at once. Harriett has stopped trying to pull away, but Maraud continues. The totem pole isn't wobbling, even a little. I hope he doesn't break his arms.

"Everybody calm down," says McGarnet. "You'll all get a chance to say your piece. But I assure you, this was meant to happen. This is good for all of us."

People continue to talk. I can't figure out if they're in favor of our grisly deaths or opposed.

"One at a time," says McGarnet. "We won't accomplish anything if you all talk at once. I promise, you'll each get a chance to speak, but we have to do this in an orderly fashion."

The crowd stops talking. McGarnet points to a middle-aged woman in a lime-colored dress who is standing in the front. "Denise, go ahead."

Denise places her hands on the barricade. "Sheriff McGarnet, what the hell are you doing?"

"Excuse me?"

"You've got five people chained to goddamn poles! Seriously, what the fuck is going on here?"

"Please keep your tone civil," says McGarnet.

"Did you really talk about a prophecy? A *prophecy*? Is that how we're being governed?"

"I understand that this is going to be difficult to accept right away  
—"

"Hell yeah, it's difficult!"

"Enough! I'll have you escorted out of here."

Denise opens her mouth as if she wants to say something else, then seems to reconsider.

"Yes," says McGarnet, "there is a prophecy. In this prophecy, five strangers from the outside world show up at our town. We sacrifice them to the Cyclops, and that frees us from our imprisonment."

Denise decides to speak again. "Are you out of your damn mind?"

A bunch of people start talking again.

"I'm serious!" McGarnet shouts into the megaphone. "If you cannot conduct yourselves like adults, I will have you removed from the premises."

A man standing next to Denise raises his hand. McGarnet points to him. "Go ahead."

"Even if what you're saying is true, we can't just murder five people."

"We're not going to murder them. The Cyclops is."

"Still, you can't leave them chained to poles and let the Cyclops tear them apart. That's not the kind of people we are."

"They aren't chained, they're in plastic restraints, but that's not the point," says McGarnet. "Do you know what kind of people we are? We're prisoners. We can't leave our town. We are stuck in six square miles."

"Six-point-two!" somebody shouts.

"Don't be pedantic. Fine, six-point-two square miles. And every once in a while, one of us is carried away to a horrible death. What kind of existence is that? Are you really saying that their lives—people we don't even know—aren't worth it?"

The man doesn't answer. A bearded man pushes his way through to the front, then turns to address the crowd.

"If Sheriff McGarnet is right, then we have to do this! Of *course* we should sacrifice these people for the greater good! Five more deaths? The Cyclops will claim at least that many in the next year. How can we even consider not doing this?"

"Because she said it's a prophecy," says Denise. "That's idiotic."

The bearded man points to us. "Then why are they here? How did they find us?"

"I don't know, but it sure as hell wasn't a prophecy. Has anybody even talked to them? Maybe they can lead us out. How has it already come to tying them up to feed to the Cyclops?"

"Like I've already said, they're not tied up, they're in plastic restraints," says McGarnet. "Can all of you say that you're willing to risk the lives of your family—your children—for these strangers?"

"She's wrong!" shouts Harriett. "Her prophecy is bullshit!"



Whoa. Did she really just say that?

"We came to slay the Cyclops for you," Harriett continues. "That's the whole reason we're here. Don't listen to her. Let us go and we'll kill it."

"Where is this prophecy?" asks Denise, making air quotes with her fingers.

A few people shout variations on, "Yeah, show it to us!"

"It's not like it's written on a scroll or something," says McGarnet. "It's been passed down."

"By whom?" asks Denise.

"By the mayor before his stroke! And do I need to remind all of you that he'd probably still be alive if we could've left this godforsaken town and gotten him to a hospital?"

That seems to shut everybody up.

"Do any of you believe that these five can kill the Cyclops when all of our efforts have failed?" asks McGarnet. She walks over and pats Seth on the stomach. "Look at this guy. You really think he's some mighty hero?"

Maraud has never stopped trying to escape. McGarnet doesn't pat him on the stomach.

"It sounds nuts, but we knew this was going to happen," McGarnet insists. "Why do you think we had these poles up here all this time? This is what they were made for. This is how things were supposed to be. This is amazing. We're mentally ill if we pass up this opportunity. It's the only one we'll ever get."

"We can't become murderers!" shouts somebody from the middle of the crowd. "How can we live with ourselves if we kill people to save our own skins?"

"I already said, we wouldn't be murderers! The Cyclops will be doing the killing!"

"You *will* be murderers," Harriett insists, though her words are lost over a few voices from the crowd. "We came a long way to protect you. I have the weapon that can stop the monster. If you let us become sacrifices, you're dooming yourselves!"

I really hope that Harriett doesn't say anything about her bracelet. We don't want anybody to take it. But if Harriett is aware enough to drop the prophecy talk, she probably won't blab about the bracelet.

"Talk to them first!" somebody shouts. Some people shout their agreement. Others shout for them to shut up. The crowd is starting to get out of control.

I guess I believe in the Cyclops now, because I'm scared shitless that it's going to show up and start ripping off my extremities.

Maraud is making absolutely no progress with the totem pole. I'm proud of him for not bellowing that he'll kill everybody if they don't

let him go.

It's hard to tell whether Jeannie or Seth looks more sick to their stomach. They both look ready to throw up. I guess Seth is paler, but he's naturally paler, so it's impossible to say.

I wish we had an amazing escape plan. Right now we really don't have anything better than "Hope to talk the crowd out of sacrificing us" or "Hope that Maraud yanks the totem pole out of the ground and then, with it on his back, starts spinning in circles, taking out McGarnet and the rest of the crowd like a helicopter blade."

"Quiet!" McGarnet shouts. "I understand your reluctance, but it's going to be the end of Rappport. How much longer can we live this way? Why should we just let the Cyclops take us away, one by one? In a world where we physically cannot move past the outskirts of town, even though there's *nothing there* to stop us, how can a prophecy be so hard to believe?"

"Why is this the first we're hearing of it?" Denise demands.

"Two completely different reasons. One, because we didn't want to give false hope. Two, because yes, it sounds utterly ridiculous. Do you think I believed it before these five people showed up? Absolutely not! I thought the mayor was out of his mind! I thought it was a waste of time to make these totem poles and stick them up in the park, but it all makes sense now."

"Who are you going to trust?" asks Harriett. "Somebody talking about prophecies, or people who are here to do a job?"

"Take a vote!" says Maraud. "Put this shit to a vote!"

"We're not voting," says McGarnet. "We're discussing!"

A few people in the back of the crowd start chanting "Vote! Vote! Vote!" Within moments, the majority of the crowd is in on it, along with Maraud's booming voice.

"All right, fine," says McGarnet, looking as if she wants to kick over Maraud's totem pole. "We'll take an informal, non-binding vote." She gestures to us. "If you're in favor of their sacrifice for the greater good, raise your hand."

Harriett, Maraud, Seth, Jeannie, and I can't raise our hands, but our vote (if we get one) is pretty obvious.

About a quarter of the people in the crowd raise their hands. Wow. It's looking good for us, unless it turns out that everybody else has abstained.

"If you're *not* in favor of their sacrifice, raise your hand." I'll give credit to McGarnet for a fair phrasing of this perspective. She could've said, "If you're the kind of *idiot* who would let these *strangers*, who are possibly *psycho killers* who pull the tails off of *bunnies*, cause the *demise of everybody here* because you're too *stupid* to understand what needs to be done, raise your hand."

It's not three-quarters of the crowd, so a lot of people did abstain, but about half of them raise their hands. So it's approximately two-to-one in favor of us not being fed to a ravenous Cyclops. I feel loved.

McGarnet almost throws her megaphone to the ground in frustration, but catches herself before it actually leaves her grasp. "What's the matter with all of you?" she asks. "I'm giving you a way for us to escape! To go back to living normal lives! How can you possibly want to reject that?"

"Because it's wrong," says Denise.

"It's *not* wrong! It's right! It's incomprehensible to me that so many of you can't see that!"

"Just feed them to the thing!" somebody shouts. "How do we know they aren't here to make things worse for us?"

"We can't execute people we don't even know!" somebody else shouts.

Now it looks like McGarnet is trying to break the megaphone in half. She lowers it, sighs, then raises it to her mouth again. "For better or worse, I'm your leader. I have to make decisions that benefit all of us, even if they don't seem like the right choice at the time."

"Nobody elected you!" shouts the person who said that they can't execute people they don't even know.

"We will keep these five strangers in custody," says McGarnet. "We will have a town meeting to discuss the situation. Maybe you can convince me that we should pass up this opportunity. I doubt it. Everybody meet at town hall in one hour!"

A few people on the edge of the crowd start to walk away, but most of them stay in place.

"Cut them free!" says Denise.

"Yes, cut us free!" says Maraud.

A horn, sounding much like a foghorn, goes off. I can't tell from the sound exactly where it's coming from, but everybody in the crowd looks to the left.

"Get back to your homes or a secure location immediately!" says McGarnet, though it's obvious that everybody already knows the drill, because they immediately begin to disperse. I see a lot of concern on their faces. This is not a good horn.

*Horns blow at my approach.*

Maybe the answer to the riddle was "Cyclops." They totally dorked that whole thing up. I should be dead now, instead of a few minutes from now.

"Did you know it was this close?" the lanky guy asks McGarnet.

McGarnet shakes her head. "No, but we've set out a fresh meal for it. It's supposed to come. That's the prophecy. That's what's going to save our asses, even if these people are too stupid to realize it." Good

thing she didn't say that into the megaphone.

There's no pushing or screaming, but people are clearing out of the park as fast as they can.

Now I too start to tug against the totem pole.

McGarnet's walkie-talkie crackles. She picks it up. "McGarnet here."

I can't hear what the person on the other end says, but McGarnet seems both surprised and pleased. She nods and clips the walkie-talkie back onto her belt.

"It's moving faster than it ever has," McGarnet tells the lanky guy. "In fact, it's running."

"It's running? Really?"

McGarnet nods, then turns to look at the five of us. She smiles. "The Cyclops never runs. It must really be interested in meeting you."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Almost everybody has abandoned us, but Denise, my favorite proponent of social justice, pushes one of the wooden barricades out of the way.

"You're still not authorized to cross the line," McGarnet tells her. Denise ignores her and walks over to us. "Cut them free."

"That's not your decision."

"I'm not going to let you just feed them to the Cyclops. That's not the kind of people we are. Cut them free."

McGarnet turns to the lanky guy. "Gordon, please escort her from the area. It's not safe to be here."

Gordon steps toward her, but Denise holds up a hand, warning him to stay away. "You cannot order me away from here. Not when innocent lives are at risk."

"Cut us free and give us a fighting chance," says Jeannie.

"This isn't about giving you a chance," says McGarnet. She takes a revolver out of its holster, though she doesn't actually point it at Denise.

"Are you threatening me?" Denise asks.

"I am protecting your safety. I'm protecting everyone's safety. And unless you want to die along with the strangers—not killed by me, killed by the Cyclops—you'll find shelter. Don't you have a daughter? Go be with her."

Denise shakes her head. "I'm not going to let this happen."

About ten other people are still here, presumably on Denise's side, though none of them have crossed the barricade.

"Escort her out of the area immediately," McGarnet tells Gordon.

"I don't think we can do that," he says.

"What are you talking about?"

"What if you're wrong? What if the Cyclops kills them and nothing changes? Nobody will ever trust or respect you again. It's not like you can just move to a new town. We need to be sure that you're right before we offer up five sacrifices."

"I am right! The prophecy said that five strangers would arrive. Five strangers arrived. How can I be misinterpreting that?"

"It just feels like too big of a risk. We need to cut them free."

"Do it quickly," says Denise.

McGarnet stands there, no expression on her face, for a long moment. Then, looking defeated, she nods. "All right. If you think...all right. Cut them free but we're keeping them in custody."

Off in the distance, a woman screams.

"It can't be that close already, can it?" McGarnet asks.

Another scream. Maybe a couple of blocks away? It's hard to tell, but it's close enough that I really, really, really would like for them to expedite the process of cutting us free.

Gordon takes a pocketknife out of his belt. McGarnet does the same.

"Do you have a knife?" McGarnet asks Denise.

"No."

"Then get the hell out of here. You've made your point."

Denise hesitates, but then seems to decide that, yes, now is the appropriate time to depart. She hurries off.

Two more screams, one right after the other. They're coming from behind a house across the street from the park.

And then I see the Cyclops.

I began this journey not believing in the creature at all. I transitioned to, "Well, something odd is going on, but it's certainly not related to an actual living, breathing Cyclops." By the time we got to Rapport I was much more open to the idea of its existence than I ever could have possibly imagined, but still, if I were asked, "Hey, Evan, is there really a Cyclops? Yes or no?" I would have had to go with "No."

There are still other explanations, I suppose. A couple of men in a costume. A holographic projection. Side effects from the Chloroform. My complete mental breakdown. Yes, it could all be one great big elaborate practical joke, and in a few minutes, after I wet myself, the camera crew will come out of hiding and we'll all have a nice hysterical laugh at my gullibility.

Right now? I cannot accept any truth except that there is a giant freaking Cyclops coming at me.

It's got to be fifteen feet tall. Its skin is scaly and greenish-yellow. It has enormous muscles that ripple with each movement. A mouth full of fangs. Slits for a nose. Pointed ears. Talons. It's wearing nothing but a loincloth.

And, yes, it has but a single eye. The eye takes up the entire top half of its face. It's deeply bloodshot and bulges from the socket.

I scream.

I think the others are screaming as well, but I can't look away from the creature to be sure.

I'd like to pretend that I was handling this in a courageous manner, but, no, I'm in an absolute panic. I don't even know what I'm

screaming. Inside my mind, I'm screaming about how I'm going to be eaten by a Cyclops, but even in my mind the words are out of order. I'm so scared that the corners of my vision are starting to go fuzzy, as if my brain has decided that the best way to protect my sanity is to make me go to sleep.

Yeah, we're all screaming. Even Harriett.

The Cyclops looks right at me as it runs toward us, clawed hands outstretched.

What a nutzo way to die, huh? Not that it's a competition, but my demise is going to be far more spectacular than my wife's. Though I still don't believe in the afterlife, if we *are* reunited at some point, I will have an amazing story to tell.

All of the people from the crowd are gone. Can't blame them. I'd be fleeing too, if that option were available to me.

McGarnet is also fleeing. Could be cowardice, but I'm going to give her the benefit of the doubt and assume that she's simply taking advantage of the fact that the Cyclops's early arrival means she can fulfill her own version of the prophecy without having to continue to plead her case.

Hell, maybe she's right. Why should Harriett's prophecy seem more reasonable? There are prophecies everywhere. If McGarnet's is the correct one, then the five of us *should* die, to save hundreds of innocent people.

I'm still on Team Harriett, though.

Gordon cuts through Seth's cuffs with his pocketknife, then drops the knife and runs away. Well, he saved one of us. Twenty percent. Better than nothing.

I wouldn't blame Seth if he ran for safety too. I'd be pissed, but I wouldn't blame him.

He doesn't. He picks up the pocketknife, accidentally drops it, picks it up again, accidentally drops it a second time (hey, my hands are shaking, too), but seems to retain his hold the third time he scoops it up.

And now the Cyclops is right in front of us.

The creature's smell is stomach churning, like wet dog mixed with rotten fruit. I'm not sure why it would smell like wet dog when it has no fur, but that's a question for a biologist, not me. It stops in front of the totem poles, and quickly glances at each of us, as if trying to decide which one to devour first.

Seth takes a cautious step toward Harriett.

What would be really cool right now is if the Cyclops shrugged, turned around, and ran off. Yep, I could really get behind that.

The Cyclops looks at me and furrows its brow as if in deep concentration. I'm not even going to lie and pretend that I'm *not*

hoping it chooses one of the four other perfectly good candidates for consumption. I don't want to die. I don't want anybody else to die, either, but at this moment, quivering in terror, I don't want myself to die in particular.

The Cyclops crouches down and snarls, giving me a dose of its pungent breath. I don't know what its breath would smell like if it had recently eaten somebody, but there's no blood on its mouth or on its talons, so the screams we heard earlier probably did not come from innocent people right before they were shoved into its open mouth.

"We're here to help you," I tell it. The Cyclops doesn't look like it speaks English, or even Human, but, screw it, what have I got to lose? Most likely we're all going to die, so there'll be nobody around to tell anybody about my stupid attempt to communicate with the beast.

The Cyclops stands back up. Then it reaches for Harriett with both of its enormous hands.

It grabs her around the waist, then lifts her.

"Leave her alone!" Seth shouts. He jabs the pocketknife at the creature's side. It's a direct hit, but the blade doesn't puncture its skin.

The Cyclops lets go of Harriett with one hand, and uses that hand to smack Seth out of the way. He falls to the ground, and for a horrifying moment I think he landed on the knife, but as he rolls over I can see that it's still in his hand, blood-free.

Harriett struggles and screams as the Cyclops puts its other hand back on her and resumes sliding her up the totem pole. It's not being gentle, and I think one of her arms is twisting wrong.

"Cut us free!" Maraud shouts at Seth.

Seth charges at the Cyclops and slams the knife into its back, using both hands. It still doesn't pierce the Cyclops's hide, but it's sufficiently painful (or annoying) to make the creature let go of Harriett. She slides back down to the bottom of the pole.

The Cyclops spins around and smacks Seth again. Those claws could probably rip Seth's face right off, but the Cyclops struck him with its palm. Seth's feet do not actually lift off the ground, but he's almost airborne for a second before he falls.

Now he has the Cyclops's undivided attention. It grabs both of his legs, then heaves him into the air. Seth goes flying at least twenty feet, dropping the knife in mid-air, before he crashes to the ground.

The Cyclops turns back to Harriett and slides her back up the totem pole. As soon as her arms are past the top, the Cyclops drapes her facedown over its shoulder. She struggles and kicks and tries to bite its neck, but its grip on her is too firm.

Maraud is struggling so hard that I really start to worry that he's going to rip his arms off.

Jeannie is trying some sort of acrobat stuff where she shimmies



her way up the totem pole, but it's not working at all.

The Cyclops turns away from us and walks away.

It's not going to try to kill the rest of us?

I have a flash of hope. Maybe the Cyclops is going to take Harriett back to its lair. Yes, this is a bad thing, overall, but it gives the rest of us a chance to rescue her. It's much better than the Cyclops simply taking a large bite out of her head.

It's only a flash, though. The Cyclops walks about a hundred feet away, then sets Harriett on the grass. I think it just wanted a slightly more peaceful place for its meal.

Seth gets back to his feet. He staggers over to where the knife fell and picks it up.

"Cut me free!" says Maraud.

Seth looks at Maraud and then at the Cyclops, which has crouched over Harriett. He has a split-second of indecision, apparently trying to figure out if there's time to cut Maraud free before the Cyclops begins to feast.

The Cyclops opens its mouth wide.

There isn't time.

Seth runs toward them, hollering and waving his arms to attract the Cyclops's attention.

Somehow, Jeannie is making a bit of progress, though she's only wriggled her way up a couple of feet. Not nearly enough to save Harriett.

I hate being this helpless.

McGarnet still has a knife. Surely she's watching what's happening, and surely she can see that things aren't going as expected. Or maybe they are. She never said that the Cyclops was going to eat us directly from the totem poles, like food on a stick.

Seth lets out a battle cry as he runs.

Harriett struggles frantically to get away from the creature. It gives her a brutal thump on the back to make her stop moving.

Seth almost trips, but sustains his balance and keeps running. He shouts a stream of obscenities at the Cyclops, though it doesn't seem to notice or care as it lowers its jaws to Harriett's (succulent?) shoulder.

Oh, God, it really is going to eat her.

"Over here, you son of a bitch!" Maraud shouts at the Cyclops. "Come and get us!"

"C'mon, you one-eyed prick!" I shout. Not my best insult, and possibly one of my worst, but I'm not trying to be clever.

"Gonna pick on a helpless girl?" Jeannie calls out, even though she, technically, is more helpless than Harriett right now. "Get over here! Fight us!"

The Cyclops looks over at us. It's difficult to identify its facial expression, but it's not a cheery one.

Seth dives at it.

He slams the knife against its leg. The Cyclops doesn't seem particularly bothered. As it stands up, Seth jabs the knife at it, again and again, still bellowing his battle cry.

It would be awesome if Seth could take this monster down with a pocketknife. Truly awesome.

Harriett rolls out of immediate danger, then stands up. She can't really do anything but kick, but it's one hell of a kick to the shin. It doesn't actually harm the Cyclops, but I can imagine that if it were smaller and thinner, that kick would've caused a bone to break through the skin.

Maraud, Jeannie, and I continue to shout, trying to distract the Cyclops from its most accessible prey.

The Cyclops grabs Harriett by the leg, turning her upside-down. As she thrashes around, it swings her in a circle like a cowboy with an unwieldy lasso. Seth takes this opportunity to stab it in the gut. I don't see blood or any other fluid leaking from the Cyclops, so I don't think any of his knife attacks have gotten through.

"Let her go!" Seth screams.

The Cyclops does. It flings her away. She's lighter than Seth and had built up more momentum while he was swinging her, so she goes flying quite a bit further, and hits the ground hard.

Seth, whose plan was apparently to save Harriett but not engage in hand-to-hand combat with a fifteen-foot-tall monster, starts to run toward her. But the Cyclops grabs his arm and tugs him back.

It raises its free hand as if to give him another slap, but this time it curls its fingers, showing off its talons.

The Cyclops lets out a monstrous roar. Then it slashes Seth across the chest.

Seth's back is to me, so I can't see exactly what happened, but it looks bad. I think I catch a glimpse of something red dangling from one of the talons.

Harriett shrieks.

The Cyclops roars again. Seth screams in pain as it twists his arm, and then tears it off.

It lets him go. Seth falls to the ground once again.

We're all screaming.

Suddenly gunshots ring out. Gordon fires six shots into the Cyclops's chest. I'm not sure if all six of them hit the target, but a few of them do, though none break the skin. The Cyclops snarls, puts Seth's arm in its mouth like a dog with a bone, then turns and walks away.

"Seth!" I scream. "Seth!"

Seth doesn't answer.

Gordon hurries over to my totem pole and cuts me free. "I'm so sorry," he says.

I ignore his apology and rush over to where Seth lays.

His eyes are open. So is his chest.

I'm not a doctor, but this is unbelievably bad. If there was a team of the world's best surgeons standing right here, maybe...

I kneel down next to him. "Seth? Oh, shit, Seth."

He just stares up at the sky, eyes wide and blank.

"Stay with me," I say.

Seth blinks. Then turns his head slightly toward me. "I...I..."

"Shh. You don't have to talk."

"Yeah...yeah, I do, if I..." He coughs up some blood. "If I want any last words."

"You're not going to die."

"Yes I am."

Now Harriett is with us, tears pouring down her cheeks. "Seth, you shouldn't have done that. You should have saved yourself."

"That would be...crappy."

Maraud runs over to us. He rips off his shirt and wraps it around Seth's shoulder, even though he has to know that it's not going to do any good at this point. "You better not die on us, you lazy bum. We've still got work to do. If I have to be stuck in this town, so do you."

Seth's breathing is becoming more and more rapid. He grabs my hand. "When this is over, I need you to find my daughter. Kaylee. Find Kaylee."

"I will," I tell him. "I promise."

"She needs to know that her dad died fighting a giant Cyclops. Okay? Make sure she knows. Even if she doesn't believe you, just make sure she knows."

"She'll know you saved me," Harriett assures him.

Seth smiles. "Also...the people in my gaming group. Tell them Graspin the Colossal fought a Cyclops with a knife. I wish I could've done more, but..."

He trails off. And then he dies.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

He's dead. I can't believe that Seth is dead.

The Cyclops, gnawing on Seth's arm like a turkey leg, walks around the corner and out of sight. It doesn't seem concerned about retaliation.

"We have to kill that thing," says Maraud. "We have to avenge Seth, no matter what."

Harriett shakes her head. "This isn't about revenge. But, yes, we are going to slay it."

"Soon?"

"Immediately."

Jeannie and Gordon join us. Jeannie slams her hands over her mouth as she sees the ghastly condition that Seth is in. "Is he—?" she starts to ask, but she knows the answer to the question, and starts sobbing instead.

I'm still shaking, though now it's from rage and sorrow instead of fear. Well, there's some fear, too. Plenty of it. But at the moment, I'm focused more on wanting to skewer that Cyclops and roast it on a spit.

"Are you okay?" Harriett asks Jeannie.

"Hard to breathe."

"You don't have to come with us."

"I'm coming with you. I'll be fine. It's just...look at what it did to him. I've never seen anything like that."

"It's not going to happen to anybody else," Harriett says. "We're going to find a car, and chase it down, and drive right over it. Repeatedly. Its life is over."

"I've got a car," says Gordon, digging into his pocket and taking out a set of keys. I take them from him.

"What are you doing?" asks McGarnet. Her gun is out.

"They say they're here to kill it," Gordon tells her. "I believe them."

"You're not letting them go."

"Yeah, I am."

"But the prophecy—"

"Our prophecy is better than yours," I say.

McGarnet points the gun at Gordon's head. "I mean it. You're not letting them go."

I'm absolutely convinced that she is willing to shoot him. But she won't shoot me, since I'm still supposed to be sacrificed to the Cyclops, so I step between McGarnet and Gordon.

No, wait. She won't *kill* me, but she might still shoot me in the leg or something. Dammit.

And then I think that I'm wrong about this, too, and that she *will* put a bullet through my forehead. I consider stepping back to where I was standing before, but, no, I hold my ground.

McGarnet stares into my eyes for several seconds. Then she lowers her gun. "All right," she says. "Do what you can."

"Thank you."

Gordon points to his car. I figured he'd have an official law enforcement vehicle, but it's actually a normal green sedan. No sirens or flashing lights for us. Harriett, Maraud, Jeannie, and I run over to the car, leaving Seth's body behind. It feels weirdly like we're abandoning him.

"I'm driving," says Harriett.

"No, you're not," I say. "You can't drive."

"You're absolutely right. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm too caught up in the moment."

I get into the driver's seat. Harriett takes the front passenger seat, while Maraud and Jeannie get in the back. I start up the car, floor the gas pedal, and we take off down the street.

"Don't we need a spear or something?" asks Jeannie. "Maybe an arrow? We've got to put the poison on the tip."

"No," says Harriett. "That only gives us one chance. It's too large of a risk. We need to incapacitate the creature and then force-feed the poison to it."

Sounds good to me. I swerve around the corner. The Cyclops can't have gone far.

It hasn't. It's right there, walking right in the middle of the street. We're in a residential area, and I can see a couple of people peeking through their front windows at it.

"Ram it," says Harriett.

In theory, I should be weighing the pros and cons of driving this vehicle right into a giant monster. There is almost certainly a high degree of risk involved. But I don't hesitate. I just turn the steering wheel and aim straight for that murderous piece of crap. I hope everybody else in the car is cool with this plan.

The Cyclops looks back over its shoulder at us. It shoves the last piece of Seth's arm into its mouth and chews.

I speed toward it. Everybody braces themselves for impact.

The Cyclops doesn't even try to move out of the way. The car smashes into it from behind, knocking the giant creature up onto the

front hood. It strikes the windshield, shattering it. As I slam the brakes, the Cyclops tumbles off the car and onto the street.

Harriett and I wipe chunks of safety glass off our clothes.

The Cyclops gets back up. I'd hope to see some blood, or internal organs, or at least one appendage bent in an unnatural manner, but the Cyclops doesn't seem to be harmed at all.

It does seem to be mad, though.

I put the car into reverse, floor the gas pedal, and speed backwards about twenty feet. Then I put it back into drive and floor the pedal again.

The Cyclops swings one of his claws as if trying to bat the car away before it hits him. But we get in another direct hit, and this time the momentum takes it all the way up onto the roof of the vehicle.

It doesn't fall off.

Crap. Now we have a Cyclops on top of the car.

I speed forward and brake suddenly, trying to dislodge it. That doesn't work. I try again. No good. A third try doesn't work, either.

The Cyclops smashes its fist against the rear window, shattering it with one blow.

All four of us in the car utter some variation of "Oh, shit!"

What would be nice right now is a ridiculously low bridge that I could drive under to knock the Cyclops off. I don't think I'm going to find one of those.

I need to focus.

The Cyclops roars and slams its fist against the trunk. I can't actually see the impact, but it sounds like it made a huge frickin' dent. How are we going to get this thing off the car?

It reaches through the shattered window. Maraud grabs the door handle, but before he can open it the Cyclops seizes him by the other arm. Maraud lets out a cry that, to his credit, is far more rage-filled than fear-filled. Then the Cyclops pulls him halfway out of the vehicle.

Jeannie wraps both of her arms around Maraud's legs and tries to pull him back into the car. He's quickly sliding out of her grip.

Harriett opens her door and gets out of the car while I pull the lever to recline my seat as far back as it will go. I twist around and scramble halfway into the back seat, then grab Maraud's ankles and pull as hard as I can.

"It's going to eat my head!" Maraud shouts.

He's twisting around so much that it's hard to keep holding him. It would be difficult enough to pull a big guy like him back into the car even if there wasn't a giant Cyclops tugging on the other end.

I hope Maraud doesn't tear in half.

The Cyclops leans its head toward Maraud, jaws wide open.

"Pull harder!" Maraud shouts.

"We can't!" Jeannie shouts back.

"Yes, you can! I believe in you!"

Maraud's right foot pops out of my grasp, but I grab it again. My hands are going to leave bruises on his ankles.

The Cyclops sticks out its tongue, which is black and covered with boils. It slides its tongue over Maraud's face, licking him from nose to forehead and leaving a trail of dark saliva. It seems to like the way he tastes.

Maraud cries out in disgust.

I dare to glance away for a second to see what Harriett is doing. She's hurrying out of the front yard of the house next to us. It's littered with various toys, including a plastic slide, though Harriett has stolen one of the child's possessions.

She bashes the red tricycle against the back of the Cyclops's head.

It's not enough to split open the Cyclops's skull, but it's enough to pull its attention away from Maraud. It releases his arm, and the berserker drops onto the trunk of the car. Fortunately, he lands on his ass rather than his spine.

Jeannie and I drag him back into the car.

Harriett swings the tricycle at the Cyclops again. This time the Cyclops deflects it with its hand, then yanks the tricycle away from her. The Cyclops roars, and then flings it all the way across the front yard and onto the roof of the home. It rolls off and crashes down upon some potted plants. I doubt the Cyclops intended for that to happen, but it was still pretty impressive.

While I crawl back into the driver's seat, Harriett quickly makes her way back into the front passenger seat and slams the door. "It's a lot sturdier than I expected," Harriett says. "I believe we need a different plan."

"Agreed," I say.

The Cyclops slams both of its fists upon the top of the car. The dent is so severe that it nearly strikes Jeannie's head. The Cyclops slams a couple more times, forcing Maraud and Jeannie to duck down to avoid injury.

I floor the accelerator.

The car moves forward a few feet, then stops. The tires squeal and I can smell burnt rubber. The Cyclops has grabbed onto the car by the frame of the rear windshield, and is holding us back.

That thing is stronger than it looks, and it looks strong as hell.

I brake, put the car into reverse, and floor the gas pedal again. Maybe I'll rip off its arm or run over its foot or something.

The Cyclops lets go, but as the car moves past it, the creature slams its fist onto the front hood. It's a really good hit that not only crumples the hood, but makes the engine stop running.

As I frantically turn the key in the ignition, the Cyclops does a double-fisted second smash. The rear of the car rises into the air and for a second it feels like it's going to flip over. But it crashes back down. Smoke billows from the front. This car isn't driving anywhere.

The Cyclops crouches down, reaches beneath the vehicle, and lifts it. It's now struggling a bit, but still, it's lifting the car with all four of us in it.

Everybody throws open their door and gets the hell out of the car. Fortunately, all of the doors still work, and we're all clear of the vehicle before the Cyclops pushes it all the way over. It lands with a crash that would certainly have squished anybody still inside.

"Did you seriously train for this?" I ask Harriett.

"Yeah. But his bones were supposed to break."

"We're running away now, right?" asks Jeannie.

"Yes," says Harriett.

"Yes," I agree.

Maraud shakes his head. He looks extremely pissed. "No way. This thing needs to feel some pain."

The decision about whether or not to continue doing battle with the Cyclops right now feels like something we should put to a vote, but Maraud is already running toward it. I can tell that he's in full-on berserker mode by the way he's bellowing, but if he's going to do this, I might as well give him an extra boost of rage.

"Kill it, Maurice!" I shout.

The Cyclops takes a swing at Maraud that, if it connects, will probably knock his head up onto the roof of the house just like the tricycle. But one thing we seem to have in our favor is that the Cyclops isn't all that fast, so its swing misses. Maraud gets behind it, then leaps upon its back. Well, it's more like he *climbs* up its back, but he does get up there.

"I'll be right back," Harriett tells me. "Don't let him die."

"I won't," I promise, even though it's a promise I have no way of keeping. If the Cyclops decides that it wants to see a shower of Maraud's body parts rain over the entire town of Rapport, what am I going to do to stop it?

Harriett hurries off. Jeannie looks like she wants to follow her, but stays by my side. We could definitely use a new car; unfortunately, there's evidence right in front of us that we don't know how to properly care for a motor vehicle, and I don't think any kindly folks will offer their keys to us.

"Maraud, get down from there!" Jeannie shouts. "You won't do us any good if you're dead!"

Maraud responds with an incoherent berserker battle cry, which I believe translates roughly to, "You're not the boss of me." He



successfully climbs all the way up the Cyclops's back and wraps both of his arms around its neck.

The Cyclops makes a phlegmy choking noise.

Maraud squeezes hard. The Cyclops's eye seems to bug out even further from the socket.

If this were a pro wrestling match, the Cyclops would be in deep trouble. Maraud doesn't look like he's going anywhere. The one big point that the Cyclops has in its favor are its sharp, flesh-shredding talons, so when it reaches back to get him...

"Let go, Maraud!" I shout. "Let go!"

Maraud releases his grip on its neck and slides off its back. The Cyclops takes a swipe at him that misses.

"We need to chop its claws off!" Maraud says.

"Want me to try to find a giant pair of fingernail clippers?" I ask. "Let's get out of here!"

I hate to be the cowardly, whiny member of our group, but when the attempt to commit vehicular homicide failed, we should have taken it as a signal that perhaps a quick retreat was in order. We need to come up with a better plan than trying to strangle it.

Of course, if I could get a chainsaw, I might be able to slice off its hands, in which case Maraud might indeed have the opportunity to break its windpipe without meeting Seth's fate. Something to consider for later.

Harriett emerges from the closest home. She's holding a pair of ski poles. I'm not sure why a family in Arizona would have ski poles readily available, but maybe they were planning a trip to Colorado.

The ski poles are quite a bit longer than the sticks Harriett used so long ago to knock out the muggers, and they're much flimsier, so Harriett doesn't look all that comfortable wielding them. But they do have spikes on the end, which could be useful.

Jeannie reaches inside the car and scoops up a double handful of the safety glass. She flings it at the Cyclops. None of the glass strikes its eye, but Jeannie's got the right idea, so I scoop up a handful as well.

My aim is better. But the Cyclops closes its eye in time, and none of the glass strikes its eyeball. Still, if we can blind it, we'll be in much better shape.

Harriett begins to smack the creature with the ski poles, focusing her efforts on its left knee. She hits hard and fast, striking it over and over, dodging the Cyclops's attempts to remove her head.

Maraud leaps onto its back again.

One of Harriett's ski poles breaks in half.

She jabs the spike from the other pole right against the Cyclops's knee. It doesn't react with an ear-piercing shriek of hellish agony and

the pole doesn't break the skin, but this clearly doesn't feel good.

Jeannie and I grab some more glass. We fling it at the same time. Neither of us hit its eye, but a few chunks go into its mouth. Maybe they'll do some damage from the inside.

Harriett's other ski pole breaks in half.

Credit to her parents: Harriett is doing a pretty amazing job of beating the crap out of the Cyclops with those ski poles. If it were less durable, that creature would be lying on the ground in a bloody pulp. They trained her well.

My third attempt to fling glass only results in a couple of cuts on my palm. Time to help out more. I run over to retrieve the tricycle.

After I pick it up, I see that about a dozen onlookers are standing outside of their homes. I guess they figure that there are enough potential victims for the Cyclops to choose from that they aren't in immediate danger.

Harriett smacks and jabs the Cyclops with the broken ski poles while Maraud tries to wring its neck and Jeannie throws chunks of glass at it. If I hurl this tricycle at just the right moment, I might splatter the Cyclops's eye. Or I might hit Maraud in the head. Or I might throw out my back like an old man.

The Cyclops's left knee has taken a ridiculous amount of punishment, and the creature remains standing. But if the four of us sustain the attack, giving it no mercy, maybe we can actually do this.

I don't have the strength or accuracy to fling the tricycle from a safe distance, so I have to get right up to the Cyclops. I raise the tricycle over my head and throw it.

There is an awesome *crack* as it hits.

Right in the jaw! I got that son of a bitch right in the jaw!

The Cyclops roars at me. I immediately realize that hitting it right in the jaw with a metal tricycle does not necessarily mean that I harmed it. I think all I did was increase its anger.

At least I didn't hit Maraud or throw out my back.

Maraud tugs as if he's trying to perform the Heimlich maneuver on the Cyclops's neck. Anybody else's neck would snap, but the Cyclops just bugs out its eye a bit more. When it reaches back to try to mangle him, Maraud is forced to let go and slide back down to the ground.

The Cyclops roars yet again, and then it...did that thing just smile? It looks very much like a legitimate smile. It's impossible to say for sure, but the Cyclops may be enjoying itself. Maybe it likes having victims fight back. A nice change of pace.

I really hope it hasn't just been toying with us.

It turns around and reaches for Maraud. It misses with its left hand, but gets him with the right, and picks Maraud up by his leg,

which is apparently one of its favorite offensive techniques.

Harriett jabs it in the back, a bunch of times in rapid succession, none of them breaking the skin. The Cyclops turns around and grabs her by the leg as well. She drops one of her ski poles.

It hoists both of them into the air, and I'm pretty sure its plan is to bash them together. This can't end well.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Harriett and Maraud are thrashing around like crazy. I wish I had an enormous fluffy pillow to put between them before the impact. The Cyclops seems to be struggling to keep its grip on both of them, but neither of them have dropped safely to the ground.

What can I do?

Well, if its hands are full, I suppose I can grab the ski pole that Harriett dropped and try to stab it into the Cyclops's eye. Blinking won't protect it from that.

Even though the Cyclops can't slash me open with its talons, it feels a bit suicidal when I rush toward it. I know it's *not* suicidal—it's heroic, if anything—but it's difficult not to feel as if I'm charging toward my death.

The Cyclops swings Harriett and Maraud at each other.

They collide. But they were thrashing around too much for the Cyclops to get any real momentum with the swing, and they put their hands out to help block the impact. So while Maraud and Harriett do, technically, whack into each other, it's not enough to burst them like water balloons. They each let out a grunt of pain, but each of them will live to see another few seconds, at least.

The Cyclops brings them back to its sides. Neither of them are thrashing around quite as much anymore.

I pick up the ski pole. To jab this thing into its eye, I'll have to hold the pole by the very end and then jump as high as I can. I still might come up short; I don't have time to do an accurate measurement. It's unlikely to work, but if it does, we'll have a blind Cyclops.

I suppose I could also try to jab this into its groin. However, its groin could be as invulnerable as the rest of it, while its eye is probably a lot softer.

I take a few steps back so that I can get a running start. Then I race toward the Cyclops, try to become one with my inner gymnast, and leap into the air as I thrust the broken ski pole toward the eye of the beast.

I strike it in the chin.

Again, I'm sure this doesn't create a pleasant tingling sensation,

but it doesn't seem to have any real effect on the Cyclops. It swings Maraud and Harriett again, and this time I'm right in-between them.

I fail to dodge this.

It doesn't break any bones when they hit—at least, not any of mine—but it knocks the wind out of me and I fall to the ground.

I realize that Jeannie is running toward the Cyclops. Somehow she's acquired a pair of hedge clippers. To be honest, she looks scary and deranged as she slams the blades against its back.

I can't see what happened, if the metal actually went through its skin, but the clippers drop to the ground as Jeannie takes several steps back, empty-handed.

The Cyclops lets go of Harriett. She lands on top of me.

I'm not quite ready to just lie there and weep, though I'm getting close. I don't want to get up again. I wish that a transparent Becky would hover over me, Jedi style, and offer up words of encouragement, but I think the only encouragement I will receive is the knowledge that if I don't scoot out of the way, the Cyclops will stomp on my head.

I scoot out of stomping-on-head range. Harriett, who seems barely conscious, follows me.

The Cyclops tosses Maraud over its shoulder like Santa with his bag of toys, then turns and runs away with him. Apparently it's as tired of taking abuse as we are. There are no gashes, such as those from having a pair of hedge clippers jammed through the skin, on its back. Maraud is struggling, but not enough to knock the Cyclops off-balance.

"Come back here!" I shout. Not only is it a lame thing to shout, but my voice is so weak that even if the Cyclops were inclined to comply with my request, it wouldn't be able to hear it.

I just want to close my eyes and go to sleep, but no, our friend is being taken away to be eaten. Got to get up.

Harriett gets up first and helps me to my feet.

The number of spectators has doubled. "We need somebody to help us," Jeannie calls out. "We have to chase that thing and save our friend."

Nobody volunteers.

"Or just give us your car keys," I say.

Nobody volunteers for that, either. The fight was a draw, but we just kicked some pretty serious Cyclops ass, so I think we could intimidate somebody into parting with his or her car with very little effort.

Instead, the sheriff's car drives up to us. I can't prove that Sheriff McGarnet was waiting for the Cyclops to leave before she drove over here, but the timing is suspicious.

She rolls down her window. "Didn't do so well, did you?"

"Bite me" feels like an appropriate response, but I desperately want McGarnet's help, so I'm not going to be antagonistic. "We need you to follow it," I tell her.

McGarnet shrugs. "Hop in."

Harriett, Jeannie, and I get into her car. She could, conceivably, take this opportunity to zap us with her stun gun again and return us to the sacrificial totem poles, but I'll predict a less gloomy future.

"It's got our friend," I say. "Please hurry."

McGarnet drives in the direction that the Cyclops went, which isn't the same direction as the park, so I think we're in good shape as far as avoiding future sacrifice attempts. "You can't kill it," she says.

"Yes, we can," Harriett says. "If all of us go after it, you, me, the townspeople, all of us, we can destroy it for good."

"You don't think we tried? You don't think we went after that thing like an angry mob? We tried everything. We used guns, all the explosives we had; hell, we tried to fling a cactus at it! It can't be killed. It can't be trapped."

"I disagree," says Harriett.

"Disagree all you want. We finally hit a point where we decided that it was better to let the Cyclops take one of us every once in a while than lose dozens of people in another failed attempt to kill it. You know how we could have freed ourselves? By following the prophecy. We had a solution, but these people were too stubborn to trust me. And, no, I don't expect you to feel sorry for me. I'm just giving you the truth."

Harriett holds up her wrist, showing her the bracelet. "We *can* kill it. I've got a drop of poison in here that will destroy it."

McGarnet glances at the bracelet, then returns her attention to the street, looking unimpressed. "One whole drop, huh? Wow, the Cyclops is fucked."

"It won't be easy to administer. That's why we need everybody's help."

"Sorry, but your information doesn't match mine, so I'll be damned if I'm going to rally up my citizens to be slaughtered. If you want to have a go at it, be my guest. I'll even let you borrow my megaphone. But I had this problem solved. You're not going to convince me that your little drop of arsenic or whatever invalidates the prophecy."

"We don't have time to gather an angry mob," I say. "Not if we're going to save Maraud."

"Sheriff, I understand your point of view," says Harriett. "I have my own prophecy, but why can't they both be right? Maybe you did the correct thing by trying to sacrifice us. Maybe that would have worked just fine. That doesn't mean ours won't work. We encountered

another man who was following his own Cyclops-themed prophecy, and if his version had worked out my companions and I would be dead and would never have even reached your town. Please, we have to go after our friend, but I need you to gather the people of this town, prepare them to fight."

McGarnet doesn't answer for a moment, but then she nods. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you."

"So I'm going to play Devil's Advocate for a second," I say. "This is purely a Devil's Advocate situation. I'm not suggesting any course of action. But somebody should throw out the idea that we wait to gather our resources before we go after the Cyclops again."

"And leave Maraud to die?" asks Jeannie.

"Yes, that's pretty much what I'm saying. Which is why I emphasized the whole Devil's Advocate thing. I'm not saying that's what we should do. I'm saying that somebody should say it out loud so that we know we at least reviewed our options."

"I understand," says Harriett. "And it is undoubtedly the wiser course of action. But I don't feel that it's the right one. We have to try to save Maraud."

"Good," I say. "I agree. Just wanted to make sure we weren't all secretly thinking something different."

McGarnet turns a corner, and we can see that the street continues for a few more blocks, then ends at the mouth of a large cave. The Cyclops is almost there, still holding Maraud over its shoulder.

"Can you go any faster?" I ask.

"Do you want to bend down and push my foot harder against the gas pedal? Be my guest."

The Cyclops runs into the cave and disappears from sight.

The homes we speed past don't have any vehicles in the front yard or any evidence that anybody lives there. Presumably, nobody wants to live near the Cyclops cave. I sure wouldn't.

As we reach the final block, I can see open desert on each side of the cave, as if the town of Rapport just stops. The cave itself is about the size of a small house. It doesn't seem like it would be that hard to just fling a couple of sticks of dynamite in there and blow the whole thing up.

McGarnet stops in front of the cave. She doesn't shut off the car engine, so I'm pretty sure she's prepared to speed away if the Cyclops peeks its head out. "The cave is bigger than you think," she says.

"Has anybody ever come out of there alive?" asks Jeannie.

"Yes."

"Oh, good. That's not what I thought you were going to say."

"Only because nobody has reached the end. They've all eventually

given up and turned back. But, hey, it's your prophecy, so see what you can do."

Harriett, Jeannie and I get out of the car. I can see only darkness within the cave.

"Let's not wait," says Harriett. "Our friend needs help."

"I don't know that I'd even necessarily call him a friend," I say. "I'm not dissing him. Just trying not to be melodramatic. Fellow traveler, maybe."

"Fellow hero."

"I don't think we get to be called heroes if we all die before we can kill the Cyclops."

"Of course we do."

"If you say so."

"I do."

"Cool."

"We're procrastinating."

"You're right." I turn back to McGarnet. "Thanks for the ride. Like Harriett said, if you can rally the troops, that would be awesome."

McGarnet says nothing.

We step into the cave. For a few moments we're in total darkness, but then the darkness thins out like clearing fog and we're walking along a stone path in broad daylight. There's no sign of the Cyclops and Maraud. Except for the path, there's empty desert all around us.

The path seems to stretch forward into infinity.

"I'll run as fast as I can," Jeannie promises, "but it's been a long time since I was speedy."

"No," says Harriett. "This path isn't about speed. It's about focus. We need to walk." She frowns. "At least, that's what I'm feeling. I could be wrong."

"We'll trust you," I say.

"We'll walk *quickly*, of course."

We walk the path in silence for about five minutes. The path can't really stretch out into infinity, I hope, but it kind of feels like we're walking on a treadmill. There's nothing distinct in the desert scenery, but I watch a specific rock to make sure we're actually moving, and the rock does indeed get closer as we approach, so that's something.

"How long do you think this can last?" I ask Harriett.

"As you know, I'm better with direction than distance. I have no idea."

"Maybe the Cyclops doesn't venture out very often because it's such a long walk."

"It's possible."



Fifteen minutes later, we're still walking and there's been no change.

"We should have brought some water," says Jeannie.

"Yeah," I say. "When she said that the cave was bigger than we think, I assumed she meant that it went underground or something. We didn't really prepare for this."

"We haven't really prepared for much of anything," says Harriett. "Look where it's gotten us."

"Are you being optimistic or cynical?" I ask.

"Optimistic."

"I wasn't sure. We've had our share of stumbling blocks."

"I know. It's been rough. Heroes have fallen. But we're pursuing the Cyclops to its lair, which is exactly where we want to be right now."

"You're right," I say, although I'm not sure I agree. If she's staying upbeat, even if she's faking it, I don't want to bring things down by talking about how Seth got ripped apart. We'll have plenty of time to properly mourn him when this is all over.

Now I think we've been walking for an hour, and I'm terrified. What if the Cyclops has been gnawing on Maraud this whole time? The whole idea was to save him, and we may very well reach the end of the path with no reinforcements and a dead friend.

All of our plans suck.

And although I enjoy a nice stroll, this desert sun is brutal. We're all drenched in sweat. Jeannie is definitely suffering. She's doing an admirable job of keeping up, but she can't do this for much longer.

A few minutes later, she stumbles.

I grab Jeannie by the arm to steady her. She thanks me quietly and wipes some perspiration from her forehead.

"You should turn back," says Harriett.

"I can't quit on you."

"We don't know how long this is going to continue. It might go on for hours. It might go on forever. Evan and I will be fine."

Jeannie shakes her head. "It's not right."

"Perishing from heatstroke and exhaustion isn't right. You can't

kill a Cyclops if you're dead. Turn back. We may need you later."

"Ten more minutes," says Jeannie. "If we're not there by then, I'll go back, I promise."

"That's ten minutes added to your return. Shriveled corpses do nothing for us. It's all right, Jeannie."

"You slammed a pair of garden shears into a Cyclops's back," I tell her.

"They didn't hurt it."

"Still, that's way more than most people did today."

Jeannie looks heartsick, but finally nods. "When you get back, I'll be waiting with the biggest bottle of champagne they've got."

"It's a deal," says Harriett.

Jeannie gives her a big hug, then gives me a hug with a bonus kiss on the cheek. "Good luck. You'll be fine. Both of you."

She smiles, though it's the smile of a woman who is ready to pass out, and turns around. I have to admit that I'm not convinced that she's going to make it all the way back. It's really going to spoil the celebratory mood if we return with a Cyclops's heart in our pocket but have to step over Jeannie's dead body.

She turns around, walks a few steps, and then vanishes.

Harriett and I look at each other. "Real or hallucination?" I ask.

"Real."

"Wow. Faster to get back, then."

"Appears that way."

"Good to know."

We pick up our pace. "I lied to her," says Harriet.

"When?"

"When I told her that she couldn't kill a Cyclops if she was dead. If the Cyclops devoured her, and she had the poison in her, I assume this would kill it."

"Morbid."

"So that you're not shocked if it happens, I just want you to be aware that, if it comes to it, I will be using myself as the vessel of the poison."

"Excuse me?"

"I know you understand what I'm trying to say."

"You're going to purposely let the Cyclops eat you?"

"Not as our primary strategy. It won't be anywhere near the top of the list. I'm simply preparing you for the possibility that this may be the only way to win. If that's the case, I won't hesitate to take drastic measures."

"Don't kill yourself, Harriett."

"It's a last resort."

"Don't do it as any resort. You didn't bring that monster here. It's

not your fault that it has killed people, and it's not your fault if it kills more. The residents of Rapport seem like perfectly nice people, but you don't have to die for them. Screw that."

"It's my fault that it killed Seth. I'm the one who started him on this journey."

"He came willingly. I mean, he even got emotional about it. We can worry about the technicalities about who's responsible for his death later. For now, all I'm saying is, don't eat the poison. Seriously. I'll try to stop you if I see that happening."

"You'll fail."

"Maybe. Probably. I'll still try."

"That's reasonable," says Harriett.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

We continue walking.

"I wonder if this is why my parents wanted me to walk all the way across the country?" Harriett says. "To prepare me for this final test."

"It's not the final test. We still have a Cyclops to kill."

"You know what I mean."

"I guess that could be what they were thinking. I think the car idea was much better."

"Me too."

"Maybe the prophecy said something about a long walk, and they confused that with walking all the way from Florida to Arizona."

"The prophecy does indeed say something about a long walk. Your theory is plausible."

"Prophecies are annoying. If you need a task to be completed, just provide step-by-step instructions and give us all of the necessary information to be successful. Think how much more the prophecy-writers could have accomplished if they weren't so damn vague."

"Or if there weren't competing prophecies," says Harriett.

"Yeah. Poor Reggie."

The sun is beating down on us without mercy. I'm starting to envy Jeannie. She's probably sipping an ice-cold glass of lemonade right now, lying in a hammock, and listening to relaxing music. Bitch.

"What if this goes on for days?" I ask.

"They'll be very long days."

"But we won't make it. Unless we come up to an oasis, and I haven't even seen a mirage of one of those, we'll die of thirst."

"We're not going to die. We can turn back whenever we want, apparently."

"Do you think we'd lose our spot? If we turned back and grabbed some supplies, would we have to start all over, or would we be back here?"

"I don't know."

"I guess we can't take the risk of losing our progress."

"Not if we care about Maraud."

"Unfortunately, we do."

We walk, and walk, and walk some more, and continue walking,

and walk, and walk, and, yes, do a little more walking, and walk, and complain about walking, and walk, and walk. And I hate to say it, but I'm almost at the quitting point. If there was a sign by the side of the road that read, *Cyclops's Lair - 1 Mile*, I'd be fine, but I can't do hours more of this. And as strong as she is, Harriett doesn't look like she's faring so well, either. Though she'll never purposely give up, she's going to do a face-plant onto the path before too much longer, and end her journey as vulture carrion.

"Are we there yet?" I ask.

"Obviously, we are not."

"I know. It was a joke."

"Not your finest."

"My brain is cooking in my skull. You're lucky you even got that."

"I appreciate it, then. I am most fortunate."

"That's sarcasm. Wow. You've changed."

"No," says Harriett. "I was sarcastic shortly after we met for the first time."

"What did you say?"

"I asked if you needed anesthesia before you watched me sew up my own wound."

"That's right. You sure did."

"I believe I was sarcastic at various other moments, too. It's one of my personality flaws."

"Nah, it's okay." My vision blurs for an instant, but I don't stop walking. I can do this. I've come too far to wuss out just because I'm hot and tired. I can do this. I can definitely do this. I am awesome. Awesome. Truly awesome. "Maraud better appreciate this."

"I'm sure he will," says Harriett. "Though not demonstrably."

"Are we sure there's a finite distance that we're supposed to walk? Maybe there's some kind of puzzle to solve first. Like, I don't know, maybe there's a moment of self-actualization or some sort of major epiphany we have to reach within ourselves before the Cyclops's lair shows up. That sounds kind of goofy, but I really don't feel like we're making any forward progress."

"Look!" says Harriett, pointing ahead.

It's far off in the distance, but we can see something sparkling in the center of the path.

"So...maybe the puzzle was that we needed to realize there was a puzzle?" I ask.

"Perhaps."

"This place is freaking weird."

"I agree."

We walk with renewed enthusiasm. As we get closer, we can make out that the sparkling is coming from a door. Just a door, with nothing

behind it that we can see. It looks like it's made out of crystal.

"As an unemployed person, I've gotta say, a diamond door would be a nice souvenir from our journey," I say.

"If somehow we're allowed to keep the door afterward, you can have it."

"Thanks."

We're almost there. There's a picture engraved on the door, but we're still too far away to see who it is, though it doesn't look like a Cyclops. There's nothing visible behind the door; it's basically just a large rectangle of crystal blocking the path, but the desert continues far past it.

A voice whispers in my ear. It's a raspy, low, male voice. "A choice..."

"Huh?" I ask.

"What?" asks Harriett.

"Did somebody just whisper 'A choice' in your ear?"

Harriett shakes her head. "No." Then her eyes widen, and she nods. "Wait, now they did."

"*You may regain what you have lost...*" the voice says.

And then we're close enough to see the door. Engraved upon it is a picture of Becky.

It's her. It's not just a beautiful woman who looks like her. The image of my wife Becky is on this crystal door, looking happy. It's not from a specific picture I've ever seen, but she has the short haircut she got and immediately regretted on her fortieth birthday. This was a few months before the terrible call we would receive from her doctor.

"What do you see on the door?" I ask.

"My parents," says Harriett, her voice quivering.

"It's my wife."

"*Turn back...*" whispers the voice. "*And your lost one will be waiting for you...*"

My knees wobble but I keep myself from falling. I reach out and brace myself against the door, which has no doorknob. I think I'm too stunned to start crying, but the flood of tears is quickly building up.

Harriett places her hand on my shoulder. "My parents wouldn't want me to turn back," she says.

"I understand."

"I am not going to try to sway your decision."

"Thank you."

And now the tears are here. Becky. I could have her back. Right now. All I have to do is *not* put myself at risk of dying a horrific gory Cyclops-related death, and we'll be back together.

We could pick up where we left off.

I'll drive her home and everything will be back the way it was.

There'll be a lot to tell her. I'll parse it out in small doses so as not to overwhelm her with all that's happened to me since she passed away.

I'm glad I didn't sell our house, or get rid of any of her stuff yet. Unless it has burned down while I've been away, the house is the same as it was when she went into the hospital for the last time.

I can get my job back. If I call Dirk, explain that he was right, that I was overcome with grief and should never have behaved that way, he'll let me have my job back, no problem.

This was my reward for going on this journey.

I get my wife back.

And, of course, as these thoughts go through my head, I know that I'm not going to turn around. Nobody in their right mind would trust a disembodied voice offering to bring back their dead spouse.

She could come back and still have cancer. I could watch her die all over again. Or she could live forever in agony.

She could be a zombie.

She could be a pile of her cremated ashes, alive and aware.

She could be buried alive, buried deep, buried where I'd never find her.

I'm not turning back.

Will I regret this decision for the rest of my life?

Honestly, I don't think I will.

This isn't my destiny. This is Harriett's destiny. And we're going to fulfill it.

"Sorry, creepy voice," I say out loud. "I reject your offer."

Harriett smiles and takes my hand. "Thank you."

"Now what?"

"Now we kick the door down."

We kick together. It didn't take much. The door collapses into a million pieces, like it was made of paper-thin glass. Not made out of diamond, alas.

Now we're standing in the doorway of a crappy looking hovel. The ceiling is high enough to accommodate his fifteen-foot height, but otherwise, it's a much smaller place than I'd expect for a Cyclops that has an entire town in its grip of terror. There's some oversized wooden furniture and a sofa, but the place looks like a meth den.

The Cyclops is lying on the sofa, eye closed, snoring.

There's a wooden crate in the corner. It's big enough to hold Maraud, though he wouldn't be comfortable, and I can hear soft banging from within. He's in there for sure.

"Don't set him free yet," Harriett whispers. "I'm going to drop the poison into its mouth."

I nod and try to remain perfectly still. Harriett will only have to

take about ten steps to reach the sofa. If I were a Cyclops of that size, I'd at least kidnap some people and force them to build an extension to the place. This is no way to live.

Harriett takes her first step. The floorboards creak. Of course they do.

Fortunately, the Cyclops is able to sleep through the sound of Maraud pounding on the crate, so these creaks may not wake it up. Moving carefully but quickly, Harriett moves across the room. I try not to breathe too loud. If the Cyclops doesn't wake up, all she has to do is shake the drop of poison into its conveniently open mouth, and we'll be done.

Her foot comes down on a particularly noisy floorboard.

The Cyclops continues to snore.

That's right, I think. Keep snoring. Keep snoring, you son of a bitch. Be as loud as you want. It'll all be over in a few seconds.

Now Harriett is hovering right over the creature. I feel like I may have a heart attack. If I do, I swear that I'll do it quietly and try to collapse onto something that won't make much noise.

She reaches for the charm on her bracelet.

The Cyclops opens its eye.

Its arm shoots out like it was spring-loaded, grabbing Harriett by the neck. It sits up, not letting go, then stands up all the way, hoisting her into the air.

I frantically look around for something I can use as a weapon. I pick up a chair. It's made for a giant and kind of unwieldy, but should do some serious damage if I can swing it hard enough.

The Cyclops prepares to fling Harriett across the room, then seems to notice the bracelet. It furrows its brow.

I think Harriett is trying to say something to it, but all she can do is make choking sounds.

The Cyclops lowers her to the floor.

Then it punches her in the arm, hard. I can hear the *crack* as the bone breaks. Harriett cries out in pain and falls to her knees.

The Cyclops loops a talon around the bracelet and snaps it free. Then it picks Harriett up by the neck again, lifts her to her feet, and flings her across the room.

She crashes onto the floor, mercifully not landing on her broken arm.

I thrust the chair at the Cyclops, but it's too heavy, and my effort is so inept that I'm surprised the creature doesn't laugh in my face. It grabs the chair from me and hurls it at Harriett, just barely missing her head.

It swings at me, talons out. I get out of the way, but it's so close that for an instant I can almost see five red streaks across my chest.



The Cyclops places the bracelet in its palm. Then it raises its other palm and slams them together.

Harriett sits up. Her scream of "Nooooooooo!" is implied even though she doesn't actually say anything.

The Cyclops grins and tosses the flattened charm away.

We are so screwed.

Harriett stands up. There's no bone protruding from her arm, but just from the way her arm is dangling I can tell that it's a massive fracture.

"Is that the best you can do? My arm is still attached!" she shouts at the Cyclops. "That's a pitiful effort! You should be ashamed of yourself!" She is shouting these things through a grimace of pain, but it's far more eloquent than I would be if my arm had just been broken.

I wish we had the opportunity to call for a time-out and discuss our plan. What the hell do we do now?

The Cyclops stomps toward Harriett, cracking floorboards with each step.

She stands her ground, apparently willing to fight it with one arm.

"Hey! Over here!" I shout at the Cyclops, for no reason that I can fathom. But the creature doesn't let me distract it. It keeps going for Harriett.

I glance over at the flattened charm in the corner. We've had a lot of terrible luck during this adventure, but we've also had some good luck, and maybe the drop of poison is still in there...

I rush across the hovel and pick it up.

The Cyclops swings at Harriett, a blow that will remove the majority of her facial structure if it connects, but she ducks underneath its claws and hurries across the room, to the opposite corner from where I'm standing.

I can't believe it. The charm is flattened but didn't rip apart. We're still in business.

Except that now I can't unscrew the lid.

The Cyclops looks at me, then at Harriett, then back at me, as if trying to choose which one of us to kill first.

I tug on the lid. It won't come off.

I need something to puncture it with.

I hope the Cyclops chooses Harriett. She'll make it through one more attack, and that'll give me time to figure something out.

The Cyclops chooses me.

It reaches out toward me with both hands and lets out a roar that shakes the entire hovel like an earthquake.

Okay, I have a plan. A terrible, terrible plan.

"I surrender!" I say. "Take me and leave the girl alone!"

I very much doubt that the Cyclops understands me. All I need it

to do is sort of grasp my meaning enough that it doesn't feel compelled to immediately slash me apart. I haven't fully analyzed its offensive strategies, but it seems to do the "swipe" thing when it feels threatened. Otherwise, it picks people up.

I stand in place. The door isn't that far away. I could make a run for it pretty easily.

The Cyclops strides toward me.

Yeah, I'm pretty sure this is going to end with me dying.

The Cyclops grabs me with both hands and lifts me into the air.

That part of my plan worked. The part that didn't, and it's a doozy of a problem, is that it has grabbed me so that my arms are pinned to my sides.

Since I really need my arms to make this work, I'm now going to get my head bitten off.

I feel weirdly calm about this.

Maybe it's because the part of my brain that controls fear has shut down to protect me.

Or maybe it's because Harriett is rushing across the room to rescue me.

She kicks it in the ankle with enough force to shatter a human ankle. The Cyclops isn't impacted anywhere near that much, but it does take a swipe at her.

My arm is free.

Not the arm I wanted, but I'll take it.

I take the bracelet out of my other hand, then jam the flattened charm against one of the Cyclops's talons, poking a hole in the center.

Then I slam the charm, which now has sharp corners, directly into the Cyclops's eye.

It goes in deep.

I don't stop. I keep pushing, trying to get the entire charm in there. Ooze covers my fingers.

The Cyclops lets out a howl of pain and rage and lets me go. I hit the floor, then fall on my ass, because in my life a moment of heroism should be followed by something undignified.

Harriett pulls me to my feet and we scurry away from the creature, which is going absolutely ballistic, stumbling around, swinging its arms, and crashing into things.

It doesn't seem to be dying, though.

"I don't think it worked," I say, which wasn't very smart, since the Cyclops is blind but not deaf. It turns its head toward us, roars, and comes at us.

It crashes into the wall.

A blind Cyclops is a lot less threatening than one that can see, but there's not much room in this place to keep avoiding its frenzied

attacks. We'd better set Maraud free and get the hell out of here.

The Cyclops trips over the couch.

Harriett and I hurry over to the crate. I try to raise the lid, but it won't move. Obviously, it's locked, or else Maraud would have done it himself.

If I were a Cyclops, where would I keep the key?

The Cyclops takes a vicious swing at Harriett.

The wall is spattered with red.

But it's red...goop. It's not blood. It came from the Cyclops's arm.

It takes another swing at Harriett, and I see a thick blob of its arm fly off.

Maybe we can just push the crate toward the doorway. Maraud can't be *that* heavy.

The Cyclops comes right at us again. When its legs strike the crate, the skin bursts into a sloppy mess. It tumbles forward and hits the floor, flesh coming off like it took a direct shotgun hit.

It gets back up.

Harriett points to the wooden chair. "I'll use my good arm if you use both of yours."

Together we pick up the chair and slam it into the Cyclops. A huge portion of its skin and insides hit the floor, leaving behind a goop-covered skeleton.

It takes a swing at us and its skeletal arm flies off.

It throws back its head to bellow in rage. Goo sprays out of its neck, and then its head falls off, exposing most of the skull as it splatters against the floor. The rest of the bones drop to the floor.

Somehow, impossibly, we just killed ourselves a Cyclops.

I use one of its arm bones to pry open the crate. Maraud is in there, packed in ice. Harriett throws a filthy blanket on him as he looks around, shivering.

"I get that you two did all of the heavy lifting at the end," he says, "but I'll give anything if you'll let me hoist its skull in front of everyone."

\*

When we step through the doorway, we're immediately back in Rapport, at the cave entrance.

An angry mob is waiting for us.

Jeannie, who is standing in front of at least a hundred townspeople, looks surprised to see us. "Oh, hi," she says. "I was just finishing up my motivational speech."

Maraud hoists the Cyclops skull into the air, and everybody cheers.

## EPILOGUE

Harriett and I sit in the doctor's office. Her arm is in a sling. They don't have X-Ray equipment in Rapport, but the doctor tells Harriett that the break is "very bad" but that "you're not gonna die."

We'll take it.

Earlier, a couple of teenagers, breathless and sobbing, ran back to inform everyone that they were able to walk past the edge of town.

Rapport is still in the same spot. It's just that now the residents can leave the way we came in. I hear murmuring from some of them about how Rapport is a perfectly good place to live, and now that there's no Cyclops to fear, there's no reason to leave. Others are already gone. I assume this is going to be one hell of a news story that few people believe.

"Did I mess things up for you?" I ask Harriett. "Should I have thrown the charm to you and let *you* jam it into its eyeball?"

Harriett laughs and shakes her head. "No. What you did was perfect. I still consider my destiny properly fulfilled."

Earlier, Sheriff McGarnet gave us a half-hearted apology, but then burst into tears and gave me a huge hug, so I think she appreciates what we did.

\*

The townspeople are in the park, dancing around a celebratory fire. They've already torn down the totem poles. There's laughter and music and food and no news crews yet.

"I think I'm going to stay," says Maraud.

"Really?" I ask.

"Not forever. But for a while. Don't mind people hailing me as a hero. Maybe I'll run for mayor. Think I'm done with fighting, so politics may be the next step."

Jeannie laughs. "Well, I'll miss you, big guy, but I can't wait to fly home to my grandson. The shop is where I belong. Though I may take

more days off in the future. We'll see."

"What about you?" Harriett asks me.

I shrug. "I'll go home, I guess. Find a new job. This has been one hell of a distraction, but I think I'm ready to move into a smaller place, mourn some more, and return to a normal life."

"Do you regret...?" Harriett trails off.

"No. That would have been insane. No way was there not an ironic twist built into that choice." I look over at Maraud. "By the way, do you really have to keep that thing with you all the time?"

Maraud pats the top of the Cyclops skull. "Yes, I do."

"Okay. What about you, Harriett? You've got this whole new world to explore."

She smiles. "I know. But first, I'm going to return to South Dakota and speak to Seth's family. They need to know that he died bravely and that they should be proud of him. At some point I'm going to make my way to Ireland and tell his daughter about what her father did. Once I have fulfilled those moral obligations, I am going back to the tavern where I kissed Mitchell so that I can kiss him a great deal more."

"I'm sure you can find other guys," I say.

"Perhaps I can. If I meet them along the way, I'll be very pleased."

"You do know that you need to go to a hospital and get your arm set in a cast and stuff first, right?"

"Yes."

"Uh-oh," says Maraud, pointing. "There's the first news crew. Who wants to be on TV?"

"I do," says Jeannie, standing up quickly.

"Evan?"

I shake my head. "Actually, I don't."

Maraud looks at me like I'm a dullard, but shrugs. "Harriett?"

"No."

"More adoration for us, then."

"Hold on," I say. "Harriett, if you're ready to leave, I'll drive you to the hospital."

"That would be fantastic, thank you."

We all get up. Maraud gives me a hug, and then Jeannie gives me a less painful hug. Harriett settles for offering kisses on the cheek.

Then we part ways.

\*

One cool thing about slaying Cyclopes and freeing townspeople

from their imprisonment is that you can find at least one person who's so grateful that they give you their car.

It's a nice one. Very comfortable.

\*

"Does it itch?" I ask Harriett, as we step into the elevator.

She scratches at her cast. "It didn't until you said something."

"Sorry. I broke my arm when I was a kid and I just remember that it itched."

"I'll be okay."

The elevator doors close. I press the button for the ground floor.

"So how exactly are you going to get back to South Dakota to talk to Seth's family?" I ask.

"I'm not sure. I'll figure it out."

"Do you need a ride?"

"Are you offering a ride?"

I don't answer. The elevator doors open. We step out.

"Yeah, sure, why not? I have nowhere else to be."

The End

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